

A
A
0
0
1
4
2
5
7
8
8
5



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY

Robert Browning.





ISAAC FOOT

100

100

100

100

POETRY & LIFE

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

POETRY & LIFE SERIES

General Editor :

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

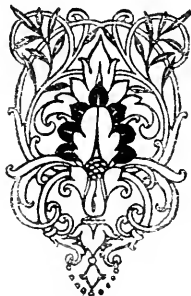
1. KEATS AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
2. JOHNSON AND GOLDSMITH AND THEIR POETRY
By W. H. Hudson
3. GRAY AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
4. SHELLEY AND HIS POETRY By E. W. Edmunds, M.A.
5. COLERIDGE AND HIS POETRY
By Kathleen E. Royds
6. MATTHEW ARNOLD AND HIS POETRY
By Francis Bickley
7. LOWELL AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
8. BURNS AND HIS POETRY By H. A. Kellow, M.A.
9. SPENSER AND HIS POETRY By S. E. Winbolt, M.A.
10. MRS BROWNING AND HER POETRY
By Kathleen E. Royds
11. MILTON AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
12. SCOTT AND HIS POETRY By A. E. Morgan, B.A.
13. ELIZABETHAN LYRISTS AND THEIR POETRY
By Amy Cruse
14. TENNYSON AND HIS POETRY
By R. Brimley Johnson, B.A.
15. BYRON AND HIS POETRY By William Dick, M.A.
16. LONGFELLOW AND HIS POETRY
By Oliphant Smeaton, M.A., F.S.A.
17. POE AND HIS POETRY By Lewis N. Chase
18. HORACE AND HIS POETRY By J. B. Chapman, M.A.
19. POPE AND HIS POETRY By E. W. Edmunds, M.A.
20. BROWNING AND HIS POETRY By Ernest Rhys
21. WORDSWORTH AND HIS POETRY
By W. H. Hudson
22. SCHILLER AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
23. ROSSETTI AND HIS POETRY By Mrs. F. S. Boas
24. COWPER AND HIS POETRY By James A. Roy
25. MARLOWE AND HIS POETRY By John H. Ingram
26. CHAUCER AND HIS POETRY
By E. W. Edmunds, M.A.
27. WALT WHITMAN AND HIS POETRY
By H. B. Binns
28. CHATTERTON AND HIS POETRY
By John H. Ingram
29. WHITTIER AND HIS POETRY By W. H. Hudson
30. VICTOR HUGO AND HIS POETRY
By W. H. Hudson

Other Volumes in active preparation



Robert Browning

BY
ERNEST RHYS



2 & 3 PORTSMOUTH STREET
KINGSWAY W.C. MCMXVIII

14

ISAAC FOOT
LIBRARY

AT THE BALLANTYNE PRESS
PRINTED BY SPOTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE AND CO. LTD.
COLCHESTER, LONDON AND ETON, ENGLAND

GENERAL PREFACE

A GLANCE through the pages of this little book will suffice to disclose the general plan of the series of which it forms a part. Only a few words of explanation, therefore, will be necessary.

The point of departure is the undeniable fact that with the vast majority of young students of literature a living interest in the work of any poet can best be aroused, and an intelligent appreciation of it secured, when it is immediately associated with the character and career of the poet himself. The cases are indeed few and far between in which much fresh light will not be thrown upon a poem by some knowledge of the personality of the writer, while it will often be found that the most direct—perhaps even the only—way to the heart of its meaning lies through a consideration of the circumstances in which it had its birth. The purely æsthetic critic may possibly object that a poem should be regarded simply as a self-contained and detached piece of art, having no personal affiliations or bearings. Of the validity of this as an abstract principle nothing need now be said. The fact remains that, in the earlier stages of study at any rate, poetry is most valued and loved when it is made to seem most human and vital; and the human and vital interest of poetry can be most surely brought home to the reader by the biographical method of interpretation.

GENERAL PREFACE

This is to some extent recognized by writers of histories and text-books of literature, and by editors of selections from the works of our poets ; for place is always given by them to a certain amount of biographical material. But in the histories and text-books the biography of a given writer stands by itself, and his work has to be sought elsewhere, the student being left to make the connexion for himself ; while even in our current editions of selections there is little systematic attempt to link biography, step by step, with production.

This brings us at once to the chief purpose of the present series. In this, biography and production will be considered together and in intimate association. In other words, an endeavour will be made to interest the reader in the lives and personalities of the poets dealt with, and at the same time to use biography as an introduction and key to their writings.

Each volume will therefore contain the life-story of the poet who forms its subject. In this, attention will be specially directed to his personality as it expressed itself in his poetry, and to the influences and conditions which counted most as formative factors in the growth of his genius. This biographical study will be used as a setting for a selection, as large as space will permit, of his representative poems. Such poems, where possible, will be reproduced in full, and care will be taken to bring out their connexion with his character, his circumstances, and the movement of his mind. Then, in

GENERAL PREFACE

addition, so much more general literary criticism will be incorporated as may seem to be needed to supplement the biographical material, and to exhibit both the essential qualities and the historical importance of his work.

It is believed that the plan thus pursued is substantially in the nature of a new departure, and that the volumes of this series, constituting as they will an introduction to the study of some of our greatest poets, will be found useful to teachers and students of literature, and no less to the general lover of English poetry.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

POEMS QUOTED IN WHOLE

	PAGE
Cavalier Tunes :	
II. Boot and Saddle	40
" How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix "	42
My Last Duchess	46
Incident of the French Camp	48
Memorabilia	64
Evelyn Hope	65
Love Among the Ruins	67
Up at a Villa—Down in the City	71
Andrea del Sarto	75
The Guardian Angel	92
Prospice	98

POEMS QUOTED IN PART

Abt Vogler	11, 97
Pauline	14
Paracelsus	16, 17, 18, 19
Sordello	21, 22, 24
Garden Fancies	25
Pippa Passes	27, 28
Strafford	31, 32
A Blot in the 'Scutcheon	34
Colombe's Birthday	35
Luria	39

POEMS QUOTED IN PART

Cavalier Tunes :	PAGE
I. Marching Along	40
Porphyria's Lover	42
Waring	50
The Flight of the Duchess	51
Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day	57, 58
Before	83
After	83
Fra Lippo Lippi	85
A Toccata of Galuppi's	86
Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha	88
Saul	89
Old Pictures in Florence	91
One Word More	95
James Lee's Wife	95, 96
Rabbi Ben Ezra	99
The Ring and the Book	102, 103, 104, 106, 107 108, 109, 110, 112, 114, 115
At the Mermaid	120
Epilogue	127

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of
good, shall exist ;
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor
good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each sur-
vives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an
hour.

THERE in four lines we have the idea that undershot all Browning's verse. He was a tireless discoverer of the finer elements that lie hid in human nature and the music that is sent up to heaven from the places where men and women throng. He never forgot in his poetry the salient ideas of beauty and power and the implied melody that connect the flying moment with eternal thought ; and for him the music lost nothing by being heard in the crowd and amid the stir of cities. He was himself a son of the greatest of cities, born in London—Southampton Street, Camberwell—May 7, 1812. He bore the same name as his father and grandsire before him, both of whom were attached in some position to the Bank of England. This, although poetry and music have sometimes, we know, been written in banks and counting-houses, would not suggest to us at once that the poet's father had any

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

feeling for poetry. The elder Browning, however, had a decided turn for verse-writing, and it is on record that in order to help his children to memorize facts and dates and Latin declensions, he used to put these into the form of a versified "memoria technica." The father, too, was able to read poetry aloud to his youngsters in a way to delight their ears, and thus gave the boy very early his sense of the value of sound and of the pronounced and uttered word. Robert was the eldest child in the family group, and it is related that when he was still so small that his hands could barely reach its top, he used to march round the table shouting out verses aloud and marking the metre with his hands. The poet was not less fortunate in his mother; she was naturally musical, and it was to her that he traced the inherent love of music that became a live factor in his history and in his own writings. His mother too was deeply religious, and gave to him that feeling for the spiritual realities which affects the whole philosophy of his verse. In other ways he depended upon her care and affection to a degree that made his first parting with her when he was sent away to school almost more than a small boy's courage was equal to. This first school was in London—not very far away from his own home; and during his school-days he learnt more from the home-books chosen by himself, which he fell upon in his spare hours, than from those in the ordinary school routine. His

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

father had an old copy of Quarles's "Emblems," which, strange as it may appear, delighted the boy ; and through Quarles and Milton he passed on to Byron, and became quickly affected by the prevailing note. His earliest verse-writing (and he began to write poetry vigorously before he was twelve years old) was strongly tinged with Byronic colours. A scheme to publish a first book of poems before he was fairly in his teens came to nothing ; but he did not therefore desist from his ruling passion. The next stage in his journey carried him on from Byron to Shelley. The late William Sharp in his "Life of Browning" tells us that the boy happened to catch sight of a volume of Shelley on a bookstall which was marked as "very scarce" and described as "Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poem." This led him to beg his mother to get him a copy of Shelley's poems—not so easy to come by in those days. However, they were at length procured, and for some years to come Shelley was the ruling star in his sky.

Meanwhile he had left his first school, and had begun to read at home under a private tutor. When the question came up from time to time of how he was to gain his livelihood, he never wavered in his determination to give his days somehow or other to literature ; and literature resolved itself in his case into one master-expression—Poetry. He attained very early to a conscious and deliberate sense of what his own scheme of life was to be ; and that settled, he showed a characteristic unconcern about

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

the worldly economy of the adventure. "For my own future way," he once wrote to his wife, "I've always refused to care." Luckily for him, his father, who had himself been disappointed in the career which he would have liked to follow, did not, like some fathers, attempt to turn the boy from his purpose. He was hardly more than a boy indeed when his first poem, "Pauline," appeared in January 1833, a date almost simultaneous with that of Tennyson's book of "Poems," and a year of other literary events of some significance in the calendar. It is very interesting to us, as we now look back over the poet's whole achievement, to find that "Pauline," which is described as a "fragment of a confession," has a motto from Cornelius Agrippa, which suggests that the writing is in some sense dramatic. Afterwards, speaking of it retrospectively, he described it as his earliest attempt at "poetry always dramatic in principle." But who shall say that he does not often in it reveal himself?

And first I sang, as I in dream have seen,
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,
Yet singing to herself until it came.
I turned to those old times and scenes, where all
That's beautiful had birth for me, and made
Rude verses on them all ; and then I paused—
I had done nothing, so I sought to know
What mind had yet achieved. No fear was mine
As I gazed on the works of mighty bards,
In the first joy at finding my own thoughts
Recorded, and my powers exemplified,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And feeling their aspirings were my own.
And then I first explored passion and mind ;
And I began afresh ; I rather sought
To rival what I wondered at, than form
Creations of my own ; so much was light
Lent back by others, yet much was my own.

He was still under Shelley's influence when he wrote " *Pauline* " ; and it is worth remark that in the poem there is a distinct tendency to make much of Nature, as entering into the life of the characters it portrays, and this is done with something of a Shelleyan fantasy. In fact, it would have been hard to foretell from the writing of this poem whether its author was more likely to become, like his master and forerunner, a poet of nature or to become, more definitely and more dramatically, an interpreter of men and women. " *Pauline* " made no great effect on the public when it first appeared, although there were one or two critics who distinguished the real or potential faculty of its author. The elder Mill shrewdly remarked on the self-consciousness it showed ; and no doubt many glimpses of Browning's early experience occur in its pages. After its appearance Browning went to Russia and spent three months in St. Petersburg. A few scattered lyrics are all that we have to fill up the gap that succeeded before the appearance of his next long poem, " *Paracelsus*," which was to be a determining event in his career. But the new poem was not readily to find its audience. As so often happens, popular attention was

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

turned to known names and to recognized reputations, and for the moment Talfourd's "Ion" was the one poetic book of the season and of the fashion to which the irresponsible reviewers gave their pens. One or two critics were prescient enough, however, to divine the imaginative life of the poem; and especially John Forster, at that time an unknown name to Browning. He spoke of the brilliant promise of these pages; and his tribute was the beginning of a long friendship. Still more important is the fact, which Browning learnt long afterwards, that a copy of the newly published poem reached the invalid's chamber of another young poet, to wit, Elizabeth Barrett, who was afterwards to become his wife. It was indeed a book rich in the promise of an imagination that was breaking a way for itself into the circle of reality.

The voice too has become stronger, the accent more significant, than those we heard in "Pauline." The character of Paracelsus—the overweening would-be master of all knowledge, the transcendentalist who longs to attain the impossible, the man who would be superman—was one to quicken Browning's thought to a point of eloquence. We find it in this noble passage (one which General Gordon confessed was his favourite in all Browning's verse):

I go to prove my soul !
I see my way as birds their trackless way—
I shall arrive ! what time, what circuit first,
I ask not : but unless God send his hail

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Or blinding fire-balls, sleet, or stifling snow,
In some time—his good time—I shall arrive :
He guides me and the bird. In his good time !

We find it expressed in the self-revelation of Paracelsus, where he talks with his two friends Festus and Michal in the garden at Wurzburg, and speaks of his quest of the Ideal and the transcendent sacred wisdom.

Take—for a revelation of the overmastering and intimate desire for knowledge in Paracelsus and the splendid casuistry with which he explained to Festus and to himself his great ambition—a page from the Wurzburg garden scene, in the canto called “ Paracelsus Aspires ” :

Par. (After a pause.) No, I have nought to fear !
Who will may know

The secret'st workings of my soul. What though
It be so ?—if indeed the strong desire
Eclipse the aim in me ?—if splendour break
Upon the outset of my path alone,
And duskest shade succeed ? What fairer seal
Shall I require to my authentic mission
Than this fierce energy—this instinct striving
Because its nature is to strive ?—enticed
By the security of no broad course,
With no success forever in its eyes !
How know I else such glorious fate my own,
But in the restless irresistible force
That works within me ? Is it for human will
To institute such impulses ?—still less,
To disregard their promptings ? What should I
Do, kept among you all ; your loves, your cares,
Your life—all to be mine ? Be sure that God
Ne'er dooms to waste the strength he deigns impart !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Ask the gier-eagle why she stoops at once
Into the vast and unexplored abyss,
What full-grown power informs her from the first,
Why she not marvels, strenuously beating
The silent boundless regions of the sky !
Be sure they sleep not whom God needs ! Nor fear
Their holding light his charge, when every hour
That finds that charge delayed, is a new death.
This for the faith in which I trust ; and hence
I can abjure so well the idle arts
These pedants strive to learn and teach ; Black Arts,
Great Works, the Secret and Sublime, forsooth—
Let others prize : too intimate a tie
Connects me with our God !

That is from the opening part. Turn on towards the tragedy of the close and pause at the sea-song that Paracelsus sings, with defeat at his back and death fully accepted before him—a poem that may be compared with Tennyson's " Lotos Eaters " :

Over the sea our galleys went,
With cleaving prows in order brave,
To a speeding wind and a bounding wave—
A gallant armament :
Each bark built out of a forest-tree,
Left leafy and rough as first it grew,
And nailed all over the gaping sides,
Within and without, with black-bull hides,
Seethed in fat and suppled in flame,
To bear the playful billows' game ;
So each good ship was rude to see,
Rude and bare to the outward view,
But each upbore a stately tent ;
Where cedar-pales in scented row
Kept out the flakes of the dancing brine :

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And an awning drooped the mast below,
In fold on fold of the purple fine,
That neither noon-tide, nor star-shine,
Nor moonlight cold which maketh mad,
 Might pierce the regal tenement.
When the sun dawned, oh, gay and glad
We set the sail and plied the oar ;
But when the night-wind blew like breath,
For joy of one day's voyage more,
We sang together on the wide sea,
Like men at peace on a peaceful shore ;
Each sail was loosed to the wind so free,
Each helm made sure by the twilight star,
And in a sleep as calm as death,
We, the strangers from afar,
 Lay stretched along, each weary crew
In a circle round its wondrous tent,
Whence gleamed soft light and curled rich scent,
 And with light and perfume, music too :
So the stars wheeled round, and the darkness past
And at morn we started beside the mast,
And still each ship was sailing fast ! . . .

If the close is tragic, it is the tragedy of the growth, not the destruction of thought. "If I stoop," says Paracelsus,

Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast—its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day !
You understand me ? I have said enough ?

Fest. Now die, dear Aureole!

Par. Festus, let my hand—
This hand, lie in your own—my own true friend !
Aprile ! Hand in hand with you, Aprile !

Fest. And this was Paracelsus !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

We have seen that the dramatic idea was not wanting in "Paracelsus," which might indeed be called the tragedy of knowledge, summed up in that phrase of its hero, "I am he that aspired to know." Following that poem, Browning was destined now to think seriously of writing for the stage; and his acquaintance with Macready the actor, beginning in 1835, encouraged him. Once, after having seen Macready play Othello, he said: "I have been bitten. I mean to write a tragedy on Narses." Presently we shall see how these first ideas grew to definite form. But in the artistic sequence of his work it is an advantage to move from "Paracelsus" to "Sordello" before going on to the main groups of the dramatic and sub-dramatic writings which he collected in "Bells and Pomegranates."

II

THE test, it has been said, of a reader's idolatry, or his perfect understanding of Browning, lies in the pages of "Sordello." It was a sore point with the author almost to the end that its poetic effect was not found, as he meant it to be, reasonably clear. We may think that the poem was written before its time, and needed that the audience should have been taught what may be called the Browning dialect, before sitting down to listen to its thrice-compacted verse. But we may account for its idiomatic difficulty

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

in many ways : first, by the fashion Browning adopted of breaking the line-rhythms. He did this through his use of colloquial idioms and by a very original and expressive mode of leaving out particles, or suggesting a change or a development of the idea under consideration by a gap and a sudden dropping of the thread.

When we remember what the rhymed couplet was in other hands, with its strong monotonous beat and decided end-stopped lines, and how it was used by a poet like Dryden, we see at once something of the unaccustomedness there was in "Sordello" for its first readers.

Dryden began one of his famous paraphrases with a couplet rather like the opening couplet of the fourth book of "Sordello" :

Of all the cities in Roumanian lands
The chief and most renowned Ravenna stands.

Browning's lines run :

Meantime Ferrara lay in ruelui case ;
The lady-city, for whose sole embrace
Her pair of suitors struggled. . . .

This is, however, one of the plain-sailing passages which do not give us the characteristic movement of the poem. In other pages, as in those of the second book, we find Browning using so concentrated and contorted a method that any one save the adept is liable to be pulled up by the verse as he reads. Take the delightful episode of the jongleurs, in a page which

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

seems to imply a lyrical clearness of colour, and note how rich, but how difficult, is the description of Sordello's lay :

On flew the song, a giddy race,
After the flying story ; word made leap
Out word ; rhyme—rhyme ; the lay could barely
keep

Pace with the action visibly rushing past :
Both ended. Back fell Naddo more aghast
Than your Egyptian from the harassed bull
That wheels abrupt and, bellowing, fronts ful
His plague, who spies a scarab 'neath his tongue,
And finds 'twas Apis' flank his hasty prong
Insulted. But the people—but the cries,
And crowding round, and proffering the prize !
(For he had gained some prize)—He seemed to
shrink

Into a sleepy cloud, just at whose brink
One sight withheld him ; there sat Adelaide,
Silent ; but at her knees the very maid
Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair ; one curl of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more ;
He answered something, anything ; and she
Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all ; again
Moved the arrested magic ; in his brain
Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
And greater glare, until the intense flare
Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense,
And when he woke 'twas many a furlong thence,
At home : the sun shining his ruddy wont ;
The customary birds'-chirp ; but his front
Was crowned—was crowned !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

This is by no means one of the hardest pages ; yet the reader who comes to it fresh from the terse narrative-verse of Dryden will be apt to find the Naddo lines break and delay the narrative current. It may be said that to present such an excerpt sans context is not quite fair ; but in " Sordello " the verse does not grow easier to the sense as it progresses. The continual effort to dig out of the page the full imaginative significance, and the dramatic innuendo with which the poem abounds, does undoubtedly grow too tiring to let the reader derive his expected amount of pleasure. Still, there are different kinds of pleasure, and those who will agree to take " Sordello " on Browning's own terms and share what may be termed the " poetic pains " (to transpose Wordsworth's phrase) will find they are well repaid for their trouble.

Like " Pauline," " Sordello " is a study of the history of a soul ; but a whole world of new experience had passed over the poet since he wrote the earlier poem, and into these pages are crowded all the fast, hurrying ideas and the gathered impressions which his first acquaintance with Italy taught him. Knowing in himself how much of close imagining and of true picturing of the scenes through which his characters passed was to be found in its vivid verse, he was mortified to find that so few could appreciate it. It is related that he read thirty books on Italian history before and during the writing of it ; and yet he himself declared that

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

its historical circumstance was only to be regarded as background, and that his real care had been to make every incident contribute to the grand motive—that is, the development of a soul: as we read, that development is in fact the progress of a man from egotism to altruism, from self to non-self and human sympathy.

In following the story we are made aware of Browning's profound belief that poetry is the destined vehicle for all eternal truths: the true poet is the seer intended by Heaven to be their exponent.

Little more need be said by way of comment; it will be enough to quote from one page in which the author's purpose shines clear through the difficult medium. It pictures Sordello as the self-absorbed boy:

. . . Suppose Sordello hence
Selfish enough, without a moral sense
However feeble; what informed the boy
Others desired a portion in his joy?
Or say a ruthless chance broke woof and warp—
A heron's nest beat down by March winds sharp,
A fawn breathless beneath the precipice,
A bird with unsoiled breast and filmless eyes
Warm in the brake—could these undo the trance
Lapping Sordello? Not a circumstance
That makes for you, friend Naddo! Eat fern-seed
And peer beside us and report indeed
If (your word) Genius dawned with throes and stings
And the whole fiery catalogue, while springs,
Summers and winters quietly came and went
Putting at length that period to content

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

By right the world should have imposed : bereft
Of its good offices, Sordello, left
To study his companions, managed rip
Their fringe off, learn the true relationship,
Core with its crust, their natures with his own ;
Amid his wild-wood sights he lived alone :
As if the poppy felt with him ! . . .

With the poppy we must break off ; but the treatment of it is worth a special note of explanation. Browning had a profound regard for flowers, and often used them to express symbolically the traits and natures of their human fellow-creatures. So here the poppy characterizes the life of Sordello, just as in "Garden Fancies" the Spanish flower there is used as the key to the lover's reading of his mistress's heart :

This flower she stopped at, finger or lip,
 Stooped over, in doubt as settling its claim ;
Till she gave me, with pride to make no slip,
 Its soft meandering Spanish name.
What a name ! was it love, or praise ?
 Speech half asleep, or song half awake ?
I must learn Spanish, one of these days,
 Only for that slow sweet name's sake.

III

AFTER "Sordello" we enter upon a new region of Browning's work in "Pippa Passes." It forms number one of the series of "Bells and Pomegranates," in whose six numbers the poet touched almost every note, dramatic, lyric, and dramatic-lyrical

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

in turn. The poem tells with charming colour and melody how the child-heroine Pippa spent a single holiday, New Year's Day, which was the one day she had to herself in the whole year. By a natural turn of girlish fantasy, she decides to imagine that she is, one after the other, four different characters, and they, if you please, are to be the four who are the happiest folk in Asolo. In order to do this she passes the day in roaming about the town. At one hour she is up on the hill-side where Ottima and Sebald have met ; at midday she reaches the house of Jules above Orcana ; the evening finds her at the turret where Luigi and his mother live ; and at night she is at the Bishop's palace by the Duomo. But as it happens, in Browning's story Pippa's happiest souls have all come to moments of tragic possibility to themselves, and this moment in one case throws a shadow over her own destiny. So you have the figure of Pippa passing with her song on her lips, as thistledown might be blown across the window of a death-chamber, just when the doom of these people seems moving on to its end. In the first episode, that of Ottima and Sebald, the shadow of death has already been darkly cast, for old Luca Gaddi, her husband, lies murdered. Sebald is remorseful and conscience-stricken, and his German mind is full of its heavy torture. But Ottima neither cares nor feels for the dead man. Pippa's song heard by the guilty lovers is perfect in melody—the most perfect thing of its kind that Browning ever achieved.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn ;
Morning's at seven ;
The hill-side's dew-pearled :
The lark's on the wing ;
The snail's on the thorn ;
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world !

To this passage we ought to add the opening invocation to Day with which Pippa greets the morning as she springs out of bed :

Day !

Faster and more fast,
O'er night's brim, day boils at last ;
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim
Where spurting and supprest it lay—
For not a froth-flake touched the rim
Of yonder gap in the solid grey
Of the eastern cloud, an hour away ;
But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be supprest,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the
world.

Oh, Day, if I squander a wavelet of thee,
A mite of my twelve hours' treasure,
The least of thy gazes or glances,
(Be they grants thou art bound to, or gifts above
measure)
One of thy choices, or one of thy chances,
(Be they tasks God imposed thee, or freaks at thy
pleasure)
—My Day, if I squander such labour or leisure
Then shame fall on Asolo, mischief on me !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And from the close let us take Pippa's last song :

Over-head the tree-tops meet—
Flowers and grass spring 'neath one's feet—
There was nought above me, and nought below,
My childhood had not learned to know !
For, what are the voices of birds
—Ay, and of beasts,—but words—our words,
Only so much more sweet ?
The knowledge of that with my life begun !
But I had so near made out the sun,
And counted your stars, the Seven and One,
Like the fingers of my hand :
Nay, I could all but understand
Wherefore through heaven the white moon ranges ;
And just when out of her soft fifty changes
No unfamiliar face might overlook me—
Suddenly God took me !

That is sung as evil fate moves very near to the singer herself, but she escapes the actual stroke and her day ends as she goes back to bed murmuring the words :

All service is the same with God—
With God, whose puppets, best and worst,
Are we : there is no last nor first.

When following Pippa's story, we were made aware at every turn that Browning had within his command almost every resource of dramatic suggestion and that lyric contrast which can intensify the action of drama, needed to make him into a tragic playwright whose work would equal that of the Elizabethans ; in fact, he had already at this period turned his thoughts

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

deliberately to the writing of plays actually intended for the stage. In the late autumn of 1835 he had been invited by his friend and mentor, W. J. Fox, to meet Macready the actor, who was then busily looking for a new play wherewith to redeem his fortunes. This acquaintanceship was to prove potential in Browning's history. He sent Macready a copy of his "Paracelsus," and at a later meeting in the following year, on the "first night" of Talfourd's "Ion," the great actor definitely asked the new poet to write him a play.

A supper party at Talfourd's followed the play, at which Wordsworth and Landor were present with Forster, Miss Mitford, and other memorable folk, and, rather to the astonishment of the guests, "Mr. Robert Browning, the youngest of our poets," was called upon to reply to the toast of English Poetry. It was afterwards, as they went downstairs together, that Macready kept Browning back and suggested that he should write him an original drama which would save him from going to America. "Strafford" was the result, and "Strafford," although a robust, well-designed piece of work, does not show us Browning in his most characteristic creative vein. However, Macready was impressed. In his diary he speaks of looking over two impossible plays, and then says as with a sigh of relief, "Read some scenes of 'Strafford,' which restore one to the world of sense and feeling once again." Later he became a little uneasy about its

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

chances, and when the "first night" arrived it was only his acting that saved it. Some members of the company were evidently not of a kind to deal intelligently with their parts, and the author was much annoyed by the ignorance they showed at the rehearsal. "Think," said Miss Flower, "of his having to write out the meaning of the word 'impeachment,' as some of them thought it meant 'poaching.'"

On the third night the performance created some enthusiasm, but two nights later Vandanhoff, who took the part of Pym, ran away, and there its brief run ended. Even so, this first exploit of Browning's cannot be held as altogether unencouraging. The play-book when published brought no profit to the author; and we may pause here to note that at this time he was about to enter on a long period of comparative neglect, which swallowed up nearly twenty years of his life and reacted to some extent on his feeling about his own work. The attempt to circulate "Bells and Pomegranates" in parts came partly of his natural desire to reach the public and partly from an accidental suggestion of the printer Moxon, who had been producing some older authors in a similar form. "Pippa" first led the way at sixpence, but it did not sell. When the price was raised to a shilling it did better, and finally the parts were sold at two shillings and sixpence. He wrote this about the original issue:

Because a Pit-full of good natured people applauded
an early play of mine, I now begin the first of a series

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again.

And here is his explanation of his title :

I only meant by the phrase Bells and Pomegranates to indicate an endeavour towards something like an alternation or mixture of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought. . . .

The second part contained "King Victor and King Charles." From "Strafford" we might quote one of Pym's orations, as he is one of the big antagonists of the play :

Pym.

A glorious thing—

We all say, friends, it is a glorious thing
To right that England ! Heaven grows dark above,—
Let's snatch one moment ere the thunder fall
To say how well the English spirit comes out
Beneath it ! all have done their best, indeed,
From lion Eliot, that grand Englishman,
To the least here : and who, the least one here,
When She is saved (and her redemption dawns
Dimly, most dimly, but it dawns—it dawns)—
Who'd give at any price his hope away
Of being named along with the Great Men ?
One would not . . . no, one would not give that up !

Hamp. And one name shall be dearer than all
names :

When children, yet unborn, are taught that name
After their fathers',—taught one matchless man . . .

Pym. . . . Saved England ?

What if Wentworth's should be still

That name ?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And there is a Charles and Strafford quarrel that may be compared with other stage-created quarrels :

Cha. Too shameful, Strafford ! You advised the war,

And . . .

Straf. I ! I ! that was never spoken with
Till it was entered on ! That loathe the war !
That say it is the maddest, wickedest . . .
Do you know, Charles, I think, within my heart,
That you would say I did advise the war ;
And if, thro' your own weakness, falsehood, Charles,
These Scots, with God to help them, drive me back . . .
You will not step between the raging People
And me, to say . . .

I knew you ! from the first
I knew you ! Never was so cold a heart !
Remember that I said it—that I never
Believed you for a moment !

—And, you loved me ?
You thought your perfidy profoundly hid
Because I could not share your whisperings
With Vane ? With Savile ? But your hideous heart—
I had your heart to see, Charles ! Oh, to have
A heart of stone—of smooth, cold, frightful stone !
Ay, call them ! Shall I call for you ? The Scots
Goaded to madness ? Or the English—Pym—
Shall I call Pym, your subject ?

“ A Blot in the Scutcheon ” was another play of the same series, and in it we trace the romantic element, as Browning conceived romance, working under the clearest dramatic law. The story is one indeed that is suffused

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

with the tragic atmosphere. Fate and circumstance, love and desire warring against fate, youth and life against death—these elements are wrought to fine issues in the tragedy. Moreover they are wrought on lines that are dramatically and boldly drawn, so as to be effective when the scenes are presented ; and the play has in fact proved the most practicable and actable on the stage of all Browning's dramatic works. It was first played at Drury Lane by Miss Helen Faucit (afterwards Lady Theodore Martin) and Phelps in 1843 ; was revived at Sadlers' Wells five years later ; and played again both at Boston, U.S.A., and at London in 1885. The character of the hapless and beautiful Mildred—"calm yet kind . . . grave yet joyous . . . reserved yet free as light"—is drawn by sure, tender, subtle strokes that make it live in the gallery of ill-fated heroines. "I know nothing that is so affecting," wrote Dickens, "nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young—I had no mother.'" The hero, Mertoun, is but a lay-figure of romance compared with her ; but he sings a serenade in which he atones lyrically, with a haunting break of melody, for some want of vitality in his dramatic character and his spirit as a true lover. Morold and Gwendolen are two excellent portraits, drawn somewhat in an Elizabethan manner. The serenade referred to sings itself, and cannot be omitted from the gallery of illustrations :

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

There's a woman like a dew-drop, she's so purer than
the purest ;
And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and her sure
faith's the surest :
And her eyes are dark and humid, like the depth on
depth of lustre
Hid i' the harebell, while her tresses, sunnier than
the wild-grape cluster,
Gush in golden-tinted plenty down her neck's rose-
misted marble :
Then her voice's music . . . call it the well's bub-
bling, the bird's warble !

And this woman says, " My days were sunless and my
nights were moonless,
Parched the pleasant April herbage, and the lark's
heart's outbreak tuneless,
If you loved me not ! " And I who—(ah, for words
of flame !) adore her !
Who am mad to lay my spirit prostrate palpably before
her—
I may enter at her portal soon, as now her lattice
takes me,
And by noontide as by midnight make her mine, as
hers she makes me !

The next play, " Colombe's Birthday," was No. VI of the " Bells and Pomegranates " series. It shows a marked change of treatment, in that the drama is, so to speak, subjectively directed upon the minds and spirits, the moods and emotions, of the characters, rather than upon outer events and actual deeds. To that degree the work marks an era in the English Victorian drama, and anticipates some of the

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

later developments we have seen. The story of the birthday reminds one a little, by its use of a climacteric day as pivot, of "Pippa Passes"; and it turns upon the claim then made by a rival and true heir to Colombe's place in the Duchy—Prince Berthold. The development of her finer nature by rapid intuition, and by the effect on her of Berthold, and of Valence, her true lover, who is a poor advocate of Cleves, is in its new dramatic way unique. The one drawback to the play is that the characters tend to drop into the Browning dialect, and the very vividness of the idiom grows monotonous at times. But from the point where Colombe first takes off her coronet, making it the symbol of her fate, in Act II, to the end, the action, it must be admitted, moves by sure effects to its climax; and the "love-duet" (as it has been called) at the close of Act IV is wrought upon a large and unmistakably dramatic scale. In the "duet" Colombe gives Valence at last his decisive opportunity, which, indeed, he seizes with the instinct of noble desire . . . and the spirit of a man who can give himself up to a great cause:

The D. . . You are—so to speak—my subject yet?

Val. As ever—to the death!

The D.

Obey me, then!

Val. I must!

The D. Approach her, and . . . No! First of all
Get more assurance; "my instructress," say,
"Was great, descended from a line of kings,
And even fair"—(wait why I say this folly)—
"She said, of all men, none for eloquence,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Courage, and (what cast even these to shade)
The heart they sprung from,—none deserved like him
Who saved her at her need—if she said this,
What should not one I love, say ? ”

Val. Heaven—this hope—
Oh, lady, you are filling me with fire !

The D. Say this !—nor think I bid you cast aside
One touch of all that awe and reverence !
Nay—make her proud for once to heart’s content
That all this wealth of heart and soul’s her own !
Think you are all of this,—and, thinking it,
. . . (Obey !)

Val. I cannot choose !

The D. Then, kneel to her !
[*Valence sinks on his knee.*]

I dream !

Val. Have mercy ! Yours, unto the death,—
I have obeyed. Despise, and let me die.

The D. Alas, sir, is it to be ever thus ?
Even with you as with the world ? I know
This morning’s service was no vulgar deed
Whose motive, once it dares avow itself,
Explains all done and infinitely more,
So takes the shelter of a nobler cause.

Your service named its true source,—loyalty !
The rest’s unsaid again. The Duchess bids you,
Rise, sir ! The Prince’s words were in debate.

Val. [*rising.*] Rise ! Truth, as ever, Lady, comes
from you !

I should rise—I that spoke for Cleves, can speak
For Man—yet tremble now, that stood firm then !
I laughed—for ’twas past tears—that Cleves should
starve

With all hearts beating loud the infamy,
And no tongue daring trust as much to air !
Yet here, where all hearts speak, shall I be mute ?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Oh lady, for your own sake look on me !
On all I am, and have, and do—heart, brain,
Body and soul,—this Valence and his gifts !
I was proud once—I saw you—and they sank,
So that each magnified a thousand times
Were nothing to you—but such nothingness
Would a crown gild it, or a sceptre prop,
A treasure speed, a laurel-wreath enhance ?
What is my own desert ? But should your love
Have . . . there's no language helps here . . .
 singled me,—

Then—Oh, that wild word “ then ! ”—be just to love,
In generosity its attribute !

Love, since you pleased to love ! All's cleared—a
 stage

For trial of the question kept so long
For you—Is Love or Vanity the best ?
You, solve it for the world's sake—you, speak first
What all will shout one day—you, vindicate
Our earth and be its angel ! All is said.
Lady, I offer nothing—I am yours,
But for the cause' sake, look on me and him
And speak !

The D. I have received the Prince's message :
Say, I prepare my answer !

Val. Take me, Cleves !

[*He withdraws.*]

The D. Mournful—that nothing's what it calls
 itself !

Devotion, zeal, faith, loyalty—mere love !
And, love in question, what may Berthold's be ?
I did ill to mistrust the world so soon—
Already was this Berthold at my side !
The valley-level has its hawks, no doubt :
May not the rock-top have its eagles, too ?
Yet Valence . . . let me see his Rival then !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

The love of a man for a great city, and the reaction of the soul of a city on the soul of a great man, offered a theme that went home to Browning's sympathies. Already we have seen how the spirit of place affected him, in some of the ballads and lyrics of the middle period. He took up in his play of "Luria" the story of Florence at a dramatic moment, but wrought it with a subtlety of motive too curiously considered for the ordinary working purpose of the stage. Luria is a noble Moor, of nature fine as Othello's but with a more developed, less simple mind. His devotion to Florence is allied with his sense of all the wealth of ideas and associations, beyond the Moorish and Oriental habit of thought, she has brought him. As he said to Tiburzio :

Sir, I am nearer Florence than her sons.

He saves her, in the hour of need, leading her men to victory against the Pisans. How does she reward him?—by accusing him as a traitor, and trying him while he is away risking his life for her. It is a cruelty his Arab soul cannot understand. So he decides not to revenge himself on her, as he has the opportunity of doing. His revenge is to die. What good indeed to live, when the one soul he most cared for, the soul of Florence, has proved faithless to him and has misunderstood him? This is heroism in its subtlety. And Browning in his treatment of the tragic close of the fourth act has again fallen back upon his favourite device of the self-confessing monologue, and given Luria a speech

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

before his death which no actor could make quite acceptable to a mixed audience—which the author, in fact, did not intend should be put to such a test. But the image of the sun sinking over Florence is an affecting one :

There—

There, my own orb ! He sinks from out the sky !
Why, there ! a whole day has he blessed the land,
My land, our Florence all about the hills,
The fields and gardens, vineyards, olive-grounds,
All have been blest—and yet we Florentines
With minds intent upon our battle here,
Found that he rose too soon, or else too late,
Gave us no vantage, or gave Pisa more—
And so we wronged him ! Does he turn in ire
To burn the earth, that cannot understand ?
Or drop out quietly, and leave the sky,
His task once ended ? Night wipes blame away :
Another morning from my East shall rise
And find all eyes at leisure, more disposed
To watch it and approve its work, no doubt.
So, praise the new sun, the successor praise !
Praise the new Luria, and forget the old !

[Taking a phial from his breast.

—Strange ! This is all I brought from my own Land
To help me—Europe would supply the rest,
All needs beside, all other helps save this !
I thought of adverse fortune, battles lost,
The natural upbraidings of the loser,
And then this quiet remedy to seek
At end of the disastrous day—

[He drinks.

'Tis sought !

This was my happy triumph-morning : Florence
Is saved : I drink this, and ere night,—die !—Strange !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IV

THE eight numbers of "Bells and Pomegranates" were, as we have seen, chiefly given to Browning's dramas. But they contained also two sets of his favourite form of poem in which the dramatic and the lyric elements are commingled, which formed No. 3 and No. 7 respectively of the series.

The first of these "Dramatic Lyrics" opens with some Cavalier Tunes which are vigorous enough to please any public. They read like lyric fragments struck off during the writing of "Strafford," and they make a gallant use of refrain. In the opening tune Pym reappears :

God for King Charles ! Pym and such carles
To the Devil that prompts 'em their treasonous parles!
Cavaliers, up ! Lips from the cup,
Hands from the pasty, nor bite take nor sup
Till you're (*Chorus*) *marching along, fifty-score strong,*
Great-hearted gentlemen, singing this song.

The third, "Boot and Saddle," has very much the movement of the now famous ballad of the ride from Ghent to Aix :

Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !
Rescue my Castle, before the hot day
Brightens to blue from its silvery grey,
(Cho.) Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

II

Ride past the suburbs, asleep as you'd say ;
Many's the friend there, will listen and pray
" God's luck to gallants that strike up the lay,
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !*"

III

Forty miles off, like a roebuck at bay,
Flouts Castle Brancepeth the Roundheads' array :
Who laughs, " Good fellows ere this, by my fay,
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away ?*"

IV

Who ? My wife Gertrude ; that, honest and gay,
Laughs when you talk of surrendering, " Nay !
I've better counsellors ; what counsel they ?
(*Cho.*) *Boot, saddle, to horse, and away !*"

It has been pointed out that the real beginning of the form which Browning made almost his own, the dramatic monologue, is to be found in two comparatively early poems, " Johannes Agricola " and " Porphyria's Lover," to which he had originally given the rather gruesome title of " Madhouse Cells " when they were first printed in 1836. In the second of them Browning uses a ballad rhythm with a curiously intensive effect, and he shows in it a power of rendering the effect of place—what may be called the place interest—which was nearly related to his art of making the surroundings of his characters take the colour of their human and their spiritual experiences. The opening

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

is written with a power of dramatic suggestion, culminating in the simplicity of the fifth line and the suspense of waiting for Porphyria :

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake,
I listened with heart fit to break ;
When glided in Porphyria : straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm ;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sate down by my side
And called me.

The galloping ballad " How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix " is too familiar to need any new appreciation. It shows again how a psychologist and an artist in moods like Browning could render the movement and the valorous spirit of life when he liked.

"HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX "

[16—]

I

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he ;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three ;
" Good speed ! " cried the watch, as the gate-bolts
undrew ;

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

“Speed !” echoed the wall to us galloping through ;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II

Not a word to each other ; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our
place ;

I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III

'Twas moonset at starting ; but while we drew near
Lokern, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear ;
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see ;
At Düffeld, 'twas morning as plain as could be ;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-
chime,
So Joris broke silence with, “ Yet there is time ! ”

IV

At Aerschot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,
And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray.

V

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent
back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track ;

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance !
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and
anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned ; and cried Joris, " Stay
spur !
Your Roos gallopsd bravely, the fault's not in her,
We'll remember at Aix "—for one heard the quick
wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering
knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII

So we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky ;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like
chaff ;
Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
And " Gallop," gasped Joris, " for Aix is in sight ! "

VIII

" How they'll greet us ! "—and all in a moment his
roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone ;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her
fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IX

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without
peer ;
Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad
or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X

And all I remember is, friends flocking round
As I sate with his head 'twixt my knees on the
ground,
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of
wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news
from Ghent.

The contrast to this page may be found in the study of a painter unknown, whose colour is Florentine—"Pictor Ignotus." More Italian pages follow—"The Italian in England" and "The Englishman in Italy." We have not spoken yet of the Ferrara poem, "My Last Duchess." This is another experiment in the art of spiritual portraiture,—the life portrait of an egoist, and a masterly egoist of the Renaissance, selfish, self-absorbed, inhuman but something of a humanist.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

MY LAST DUCHESS

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive ; I call
That piece a wonder, now : Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her ? I said
" Frà Pandolf " by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there ; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek : perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say " Her mantle laps
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or " Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat ; " such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart . . . how shall I say ? . . . too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed ; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 't was all one ! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good ; but
thanked

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping, and I chuse
Never to stoop. Oh, Sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave com-
mands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your Master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

In certain poems of this volume Browning mixed his two methods, the ballad mode and the monologue; and in his "Count Gismond" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" he adapts himself in turn without difficulty to the moods and characters of a Provençal knight-at-arms or a Spanish monk. In his "Incident of the French Camp" he deals again with the

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

single episode, related with the utmost suggestive rapidity and carried to a tragic end in five stanzas.

INCIDENT OF THE FRENCH CAMP

I

You know, we French stormed Ratisbon :
A mile or so away
On a little mound, Napoléon
Stood on our storming-day ;
With neck out-thrust, you fancy how,
Legs wide, arms locked behind,
As if to balance the prone brow
Oppressive with its mind.

II

Just as perhaps he mused " My plans
That soar, to earth may fall,
Let once my army-leader Lannes
Waver at yonder wall, "—
Out 'twixt the battery-smokes there flew
A rider, bound on bound
Full-galloping ; nor bridle drew
Until he reached the mound.

III

Then off there flung in smiling joy,
And held himself erect
By just his horse's mane, a boy :
You hardly could suspect—
(So tight he kept his lips compressed,
Scarce any blood came thro')
You looked twice ere you saw his breast
Was all but shot in two.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IV

“ Well,” cried he, “ Emperor, by God’s grace
We’ve got you Ratisbon !
The Marshal’s in the market-place,
And you’ll be there anon
To see your flag-bird flap his vans
Where I, to heart’s desire,
Perched him ! ” The Chief’s eye flashed ; his
plans
Soared up again like fire.

V

The Chief’s eye flashed ; but presently
Softened itself, as sheathes
A film the mother eagle’s eye
When her bruised eaglet breathes :
“ You’re wounded ! ” “ Nay,” his soldier’s pride
Touched to the quick, he said :
“ I’m killed, Sire ! ” And, his Chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead.

It is not easy in these pages to come upon any glimpses that reveal the poet in his own life, save by those inferences which it is not always safe to draw. The poem called “ Waring ” in this series is really a draft from the life of his friend and fellow-poet, Alfred Domett. He had written in one of his many confidences to “ Waring ” about his work : “ You can do anything . . . and will do much. . . . *I will, if I live.* ” Here we have Browning and his friend scheming and working together in the London of the 'forties. And the very echo of

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

its streets seems to linger in the opening passages of the poem :

What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip,
Chose land-travel or seafaring,
Boots and chest, or staff and scrip,
Rather than pace up and down
Any longer London-town ?

Who'd have guessed it from his lip,
Or his brow's accustomed bearing,
On the night he thus took ship,
Or started landward ?—little caring
For us, it seems, who supped together,
(Friends of his too, I remember)
And walked home thro' the merry weather,
The snowiest in all December ;
I left his arm that night myself
For what's-his-name's, the new prose-poet,
That wrote the book there, on the shelf—
How, forsooth, was I to know it
If Waring meant to glide away
Like a ghost at break of day ?
Never looked he half so gay !

Afterwards, when Domett had gone abroad and was actually living on the land, Browning wrote to him offering to open the doors of certain offices : “ I know the editors now and I will do my best for you, but don't leave off ploughing, for poetry will come of that.”

In the same cycle “ The Flight of the Duchess ” is in some sort an improvisation, what one may call a ballad-at-large. Its fluent, garrulous

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

verse flows on with a torrent of words, epithets, and double rhymes :

Whether they weld you, for instance, a snaffle
With side-bars never a brute can baffle ;
Or a lock that's a puzzle of wards within wards ;
Or, if your colt's fore-foot inclines to curve inwards,
Horseshoes they'll hammer which turn on a swivel
And won't allow the hoof to shrivel ;
Then they cast bells like the shell of the winkle,
That keep a stout heart in the ram with their tinkle :
But the sand—they pinch and pound it like otters ;
Commend me to Gypsy glass-makers and potters !
Glasses they'll blow you, crystal-clear,
Where just a faint cloud of rose shall appear,
As if in pure water you dropped and let die
A bruised black-blooded mulberry.

Meanwhile Browning was working the other dramatic vein in his plays. But as he went on he came to recognize that the chances of writing drama which should be acted under the conditions that then obtained on the London stage must shut off the freer exercise of his own real dramatic faculty. In "A Soul's Tragedy" he produced finally a manifesto of his failure to face conditions so exacting. It is written in two parts, with no question of acts or scenes or stage directions, and the first part is devoted to "what was called the poetry of Chiappino's life" and the second part to its prose. The hero is painted in self-revelatory colours that suggest the moral motley of an incomplete character. He is a grumbler and a self-deceiver, not quite a man and not quite a patriot. While

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

we are speculating about him and what his full nature is meant to be, the dramatic crisis occurs : his friend, Luitolfo, appears abruptly on the scene in a moment of need because he has struck and apparently killed the Provost. Then it seems Chiappino is to prove a hero indeed, for he is ready to take his friend's garb and his guilt upon him and to die in his place. But instead of the soldiers to arrest a murderer, it is the people that rush in to hail him as the deliverer of his country, and they call upon him now to lead them. This puts his substitute Chiappino into a pretty dilemma, and the issue can only be properly enjoyed by reading the play itself. In the second part Browning drops back upon prose in place of blank verse, and there the interlocutions of Ogniben are full of humour and picturesque dialectic and living observation. But the set of actors who could put "A Soul's Tragedy" on the stage and make it as tragic and as comic as Browning intended, is yet to be discovered. Indeed it is clear that he never really meant it to be acted save on the imaginary stage that was on the other side of his writing-table.

V

WE have spoken already of the effect produced by "Paracelsus" upon one reader, Elizabeth Barrett. The acquaintance to which that led had soon ripened into friendship and then into love. His friend

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Kenyon had suggested to Browning that he should write to her a letter which was dated January 10, 1845. The letter began, all short, with a tribute which would have gone to the heart of any poet, to wit, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett." Owing to an accident when she was a young girl, by which she was thrown from a pony, Miss Barrett was an invalid and more or less a prisoner to her own room. What may be called internal events, and those which bore upon her own ideals in art and poetry, counted to her more than such things do in ordinary lives. Her new friend brought into her sick chamber robust airs of the outer world, but still a world played upon by that light of imagination which to her was all in all. Gradually the two friends became indispensable to one another, and when one autumn it became a question of the invalid's being sent to winter abroad, their relationship was carried definitely to a climax in their engagement, although it had to be an engagement kept secret from her father. Mr. Barrett was rather in the way of fulfilling the part of the old-style pattern-father who took his children's affairs and destinies into his own hands and ruled their lives without much consideration of their own feelings. He had already prevented one daughter from accepting the man of her choice, and it soon became plain that his opposition to Elizabeth's connexion with the lover whose chief means of livelihood was poetry was likely to be stern and uncompromising. As it

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

was, he prevented his daughter from going abroad, although her health was markedly endangered by her staying in England. However, what the father proposed, the fates had decided otherwise. One morning in September 1846—the year when the last or eighth part of “Bells and Pomegranates,” containing “Luria” and “A Soul’s Tragedy,” was published—the daughter left her father’s door in Wimpole Street, attended by a single maid, and found her way to the nearest cab-stand. The cab took them to the Church of St. Marylebone, where the two poets were married, to part again at the church door. They did not see each other for some days after that important event, but meanwhile their plans had been arranged for their final flight abroad—very trying days for both of them. On the following Saturday afternoon, while according to the Victorian custom the rest of the household were at dinner, the newly married bride and her maid again crept out of the house and drove to the railway-station for Southampton. Next morning they had reached Paris. The communion between the two was so absolute, the experiences which they shared together in Italy and the ideas arising out of their life together there were poetically so significant, that we naturally look to find a new spirit entering into the pages of both writers. In the story of “Luria” we found Pisa, as it were, confronting Florence, and it was at Pisa that they made their abode for the first winter. They had quarters near

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

the Duomo, and the famous Leaning Tower was visible from their windows. Here Mrs. Browning wrote "Sonnets from the Portuguese," in which she reaches the highest mark of her achievement. One day (as Mr. Gosse has related), when Robert Browning stood looking out of the window at the spectacle in the street, waiting for the breakfast-table to be cleared that he might settle to work, his wife stood up behind him and put a little packet of papers into his coat-pocket. These papers contained the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," and as they had been written unknown to him, his wonder and delight may be conceived. They impressed him indeed as "the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare," and that is a verdict assuredly with which no critic will be in any hurry to quarrel. They did not at first bear the title by which we now know them. Their writer, wishing to throw a disguise over the passionate love they expressed, at first thought of calling them "Sonnets from the Bosnian," as if to suggest that they were paraphrases from another tongue. But Browning sometimes called his wife his "little Portuguese," and he it was who advised their being given that label, saying, "They are Caterina's sonnets." The following spring they left Pisa for Florence; and there they found quarters to their mind at last in the Guidi Palace—in a fine suite of rooms which commanded the Church of San Felici. These surroundings account for the title of Mrs.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Browning's next work, "Casa Guidi Windows." There too "Aurora Leigh" was begun, and in March 1849 a son was born. These were anxious days for Browning, with the health of a sensitive and delicate wife going through so great a strain; and at home the death of his mother, to whom he was fondly devoted, the news of which came to him almost on the morrow of his son's birth, proved a greater care than his own health could bear. They travelled about, accordingly, in the next few weeks through Italy and drank fresh health and great draughts of Italian life and spring-time, and Browning, seeing his wife's delight in these new experiences, began himself to revive. His mind recovered its force and resilience, and presently he gathered up his new energies for the writing of his remarkable poem of spiritual vision and powerful realistic imagination, "Christmas Eve and Easter Day."

We are made aware as we turn the pages of this poem of 1849-50 that a change has passed over the writer's mind, and that he has thought out vividly and passionately some of those questions of destiny and judgment which can touch an imaginative spirit to great issues. Of the two sections of the book, "Christmas Eve" is a description of an almost uncouth religious experience. The picture of the little chapel is touched in with grotesque colours that have been likened to those in some of the prose pictures of Dickens. In them indeed Browning seems to have anticipated and given

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

the cue to some of our latest realistic versemen who have attempted to deal vitally with the sensations and the religious overtaking of the reprobate and the outcast. Take the opening cartoon :

Out of the little chapel I burst
Into the fresh night air again.
I had waited a good five minutes first
In the doorway, to escape the rain
That drove in gusts down the common's centre,
At the edge of which the chapel stands,
Before I plucked up heart to enter :
Heaven knows how many sorts of hands
Reached past me, groping for the latch
Of the inner door that hung on catch,
More obstinate the more they fumbled,
Till, giving way at last with a scold
Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled
One sheep more to the rest in fold,
And left me irresolute, standing sentry
In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry,
Four feet long by two feet wide,
Partitioned off from the vast inside—
I blocked up half of it at least.

The study of the sky in one of the succeeding pages is painted with no less power. In this passage Browning uses, as he has often before, and as he was often to do again, his skyscape to enlarge and to heighten the sense of the human experiences that are passing more or less unconsciously below.

The companion pictures of the agnostic Professor's lecture-room in Göttingen and of the

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

“Easter Day” amid the pomp and splendour of the Basilica at Rome bring to the pages of this work a memorable quality which marks them out in the Browning record. And again, in the “Easter Day” poem, the mysterious spectacle of the sky and of the dome of heaven towering up above the city adds a last touch of symbolic meaning to the argument :

And as I said

This nonsense, throwing back my head
With light complacent laugh, I found
Suddenly all the midnight round
One fire. The dome of Heaven had stood
As made up of a multitude
Of handbreadth cloudlets, one vast rack
Of ripples infinite and black,
From sky to sky. Sudden there went,
Like horror and astonishment,
A fierce vindictive scribble of red
Quick flame across, as if one said
(The angry scribe of Judgment) “There—
Burn it !” And straight I was aware
That the whole ribwork round, minute
Cloud touching cloud beyond compute,
Was tinted each with its own spot
Of burning at the core, till clot
Jammed against clot, and spilt its fire
Over all heaven, which ’gan suspire
As fanned to measure equable,—
As when great conflagrations kill
Night overhead, and rise and sink,
Reflected. Now the fire would shrink
And wither off the blasted face
Of heaven, and I distinct could trace

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

The sharp black ridgy outlines left
Unburned like network—then, each cleft
The fire had been sucked back into,
Regorged, and out it surging flew
Furiously, and night writhed inflamed,
Till, tolerating to be tamed
No longer, certain rays world-wide
Shot downwardly, on every side,
Caught past escape ; the earth was lit ;
As if a dragon's nostril split
And all his famished ire o'erflowed ;
Then, as he winced at his Lord's goad,
Back he inhaled : whereat I found
The clouds into vast pillars bound,
Based on the corners of the earth,
Propping the skies at top : a dearth
Of fire i' the violet intervals,
Leaving exposed the utmost walls
Of time, about to tumble in
And end the world.

The passage of the sixteenth canto that follows
is needed to complete the effect :

I felt begin

The Judgment-Day : to retrocede
Was too late now.—“ In very deed,”
(I uttered to myself) “ that Day ! ”
The intuition burned away
All darkness from my spirit too—
There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew,
Choosing the world. The choice was made—
And naked and disguiseless stayed,
And unevadeable, the fact.
My brain held ne'ertheless compact

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Its senses, nor my heart declined
Its office—rather, both combined
To help me in this juncture—I
Lost not a second,—agony
Gave boldness : there, my life had end
And my choice with it—best defend,
Applaud them ! I resolved to say,
“ So was I framed by Thee, this way
I put to use Thy senses here !
It was so beautiful, so near,
Thy world,—what could I do but choose
My part there ? Nor did I refuse
To look above the transient boon
In time—but it was hard so soon
As in a short life, to give up
Such beauty : I had put the cup
Undrained of half its fullness, by ;
But, to renounce it utterly,
—That was too hard ! ” . . .

What is remarkable in the poem is that Browning does not use in it one direct didactic note. He leaves the message which it contains to be drawn from the imaginative suggestion and the figurative life which are inherent in the subject as he conceives it. In spite of the fact, moreover, that it also is ostensibly a dramatic deliverance, yet the conviction with which it is written is not to be mistaken. As one critic has said of it : “ While the poet does not necessarily identify himself with the seer of the vision, his poem contains some of his deepest thoughts on life and religion.”

This criticism leads us to one of Browning's rare prose-pieces, his introductory essay to

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

certain newly discovered letters of Shelley, which were afterwards found to be forged. It affords a testament incidentally of his own poetic creed, in which he distinguishes between the "fashioner" and the "seer":

The objective poet is one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction. It has been obtained through the poet's double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply than is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole. . . . Such a poet is properly the ποιήτης, the fashioner; and the thing fashioned, his poetry, will of necessity be substantive, projected from himself and distinct. . . .

The subjective poet, gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth—an ultimate view aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand—it is toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

he has to do ; and he digs where he stands—preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. Such a poet does not deal habitually with the picturesque groupings and tempestuous tossings of the forest trees, but with their roots and fibres naked to the chalk and stone. . . .

It seems not so much from any essential distinction in the faculty of the two poets or in the nature of the objects contemplated by either, as in the more immediate adaptability of these objects to the distinct purpose of each that the objective poet in his appeal to the aggregate human mind chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing in its pure form is what we call dramatic poetry) ; while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain. . . .

Perhaps we may now decide that as he went on, Browning, realizing the difference in spirit between the types he analysed in this essay, felt in himself that the time had come to unite their two functions in one. Hence that artistic union of the lyric and dramatic elements which enabled him to effect his new interpretation, and lent special force to his next book with its various freight.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

VI

IF one were obliged by the exigencies of time, or of an earthquake, to take to flight with the smallest possible amount of literary baggage, the single work of Browning's that it would be hardest to leave behind would be "Men and Women." That is the judgment by consent of his sympathetic critics—one which will be found to hold good when all his works, late or early, are ranged in their whole extent side by side.

The Brownings paid a visit to London in 1855, the year when "Men and Women" appeared, and, casting back to that period with our present feeling about the value of his work and his unshaken fame, we find it difficult to believe that he was still comparatively an unknown poet, and that in fact writers whose names we are willingly forgetting had then three and four times his popularity. Nothing proves so clearly the conviction and the belief in his message with which Browning followed his ideal than the simple fact that he wrote much of his finest work when he was receiving no encouragement from the public, and when the critics looked upon his verse as crude, or unintelligible, which was even worse.

However, if there was a fine fortitude in this, it was one that he shared with other poets of the true line; and Shelley sang with far less appreciation in his day than Browning. We

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

are indirectly reminded of it by the poem
"Memorabilia" in this very book :

MEMORABILIA

I

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you ?
And did you speak to him again ?
How strange it seems, and new !

II

But you were living before that,
And you are living after,
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter !

III

I crossed a moor with a name of its own
And a use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about—

IV

For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—
Well, I forget the rest.

There it is an eagle-feather that becomes the talisman of remembrance. In "Evelyn Hope" it is a "piece of geranium-flower" that is figured dying in the glass beside the death-

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

bed, and a leaf is shut into the maiden's cold hand.

EVELYN HOPE

I

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead :
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed ;
She plucked that piece of geranium-flower,
Beginning to die too, in the glass.
Little has yet been changed, I think—
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays thro' the hinge's chink.

II

Sixteen years old when she died !
Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name—
It was not her time to love : beside,
Her life had many a hope and aim,
Duties enough and little cares,
And now was quiet, now astir—
Till God's hand beckoned unawares,
And the sweet white brow is all of her.

III

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope ?
What, your soul was pure and true,
The good stars met in your horoscope,
Made you of spirit, fire and dew—
And just because I was thrice as old,
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was nought to each, must I be told ?
We were fellow mortals, nought beside ?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IV

No, indeed ! for God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love,—
I claim you still, for my own love's sake !
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few—
Much is to learn and much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you.

V

But the time will come,—at last it will,
When, Evelyn Hope, what meant, I shall say,
In the lower earth, in the years long still,
That body and soul so pure and gay ?
Why your hair was amber, I shall divine,
And your mouth of your own geranium's red—
And what you would do with me, in fine,
In the new life come in the old one's stead.

VI

I have lived, I shall say, so much since then,
Given up myself so many times,
Gained me the gains of various men,
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes ;
Yet one thing, one, in my soul's full scope,
Either I missed or itself missed me—
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope !
What is the issue ? let us see !

VII

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while ;
My heart seemed full as it could hold—

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

There was place and to spare for the frank young
smile

And the red young mouth and the hair's young
gold.

So, hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep—

See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand.

There, that is our secret I go to sleep ;

You will wake, and remember, and understand.

Side by side with this elegy, suggested by the death of a young girl, we place "Love among the Ruins," a noble poem over a dead city. It is one that only Browning would have written, who felt as intensely about old houses, old castles, old cities, as he did about the human folk, living and dead, of his experience. The two poems gain by being studied in sequence—the open and rather plaintive melody of "Evelyn Hope" offers an interesting rhythmical contrast to the alternated stride, long and short, of "Love among the Ruins."

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

I

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles

Miles and miles

On the solitary pastures where our sheep

Half-asleep

Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop

As they crop—

II

Was the site once of a city great and gay,

(So they say)

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Of our country's very capital, its prince

Ages since

Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far

Peace or war.

III

Now—the country does not even boast a tree,

As you see,

To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills

From the hills

Intersect and give a name to, (else they run

Into one)

IV

Where the domed and daring palace shot its spires

Up like fires

O'er the hundred-gated circuit of a wall

Bounding all,

Made of marble, men might march on nor be prest,

Twelve abreast.

V

And such plenty and perfection, see, of grass

Never was !

Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'erspreads

And embeds

Every vestige of the city, guessed alone,

Stock or stone—

VI

Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe

Long ago ;

Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame

Struck them tame ;

And that glory and that shame alike, the gold

Bought and sold.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

VII

Now,—the single little turret that remains
 On the plains,
By the caper overrooted, by the gourd
 Overscored,
While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
 Through the chinks—

VIII

Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
 Sprang sublime,
And a burning ring all round, the chariots traced
 As they raced,
And the monarch and his minions and his dames
 Viewed the games.

IX

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
 Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
 In such peace,
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
 Melt away—

X

That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
 Waits me there
In the turret, whence the charioteers caught soul
 For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breath-
 less, dumb
 Till I come.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

XI

But he looked upon the city, every side,
 Far and wide,
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'
 Colonnades,
All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,—and then,
 All the men !

XII

When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
 Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
 Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
 Each on each.

XIII

In one year they sent a million fighters forth
 South and north,
And they built their gods a brazen pillar high
 As the sky,
Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—
 Gold, of course.

XIV

Oh, heart ! oh, blood that freezes, blood that burns !
 Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin !
 Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest.
 Love is best !

There is the vision of a dead city ; the
garrulous desire of the pleasure of a live one,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

as pictured and envied by an Italian person of quality, is humorously wrought into the page of another poem (which lends itself uncommonly well to being read aloud) :

UP AT A VILLA—DOWN IN THE CITY

(AS DISTINGUISHED BY AN ITALIAN PERSON OF QUALITY)

I

Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,
The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city-square.
Ah, such a life, such a life, as one leads at the window there !

II

Something to see, by Bacchus, something to hear, at least !
There, the whole day long, one's life is a perfect feast ;
While up at a villa one lives, I maintain it, no more than a beast.

III

Well now, look at our villa ! stuck like the horn of a bull
Just on a mountain's edge as bare as the creature's skull,
Save a mere shag of a bush with hardly a leaf to pull !
—I scratch my own, sometimes, to see if the hair's turned wool.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IV

But the city, oh the city—the square with the houses
Why ?
They are stone-faced, white as a curd, there's some-
thing to take the eye !
Houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry !
You watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters,
who hurries by :
Green blinds, as a matter of course, to draw when
the sun gets high ;
And the shops with fanciful signs which are painted
properly.

V

What of a villa ? Though winter be over in March
by rights,
'Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered
well off the heights :
You've the brown ploughed land before, where the
oxen steam and wheeze,
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint grey
olive trees.

VI

Is it better in May, I ask you ? you've summer all
at once ;
In a day he leaps complete with a few strong April
suns !
'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen
three fingers well,
The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great
red bell,
Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children to
pick and sell.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

VII

Is it ever hot in the square ? There's a fountain to
spout and splash !
In the shade it sings and springs ; in the shine such
foam-bows flash
On the horses with curling fish-tails, that prance and
paddle and pash
Round the lady atop in the conch—fifty gazers do not
abash,
Though all that she wears is some weeds round her
waist in a sort of sash !

VIII

All the year long at the villa, nothing's to see though
you linger,
Except yon cypress that points like Death's lean
lifted forefinger.
Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix in the
corn and mingle,
Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem
a-tingle.
Late August or early September, the stunning cicada
is shrill,
And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the
resinous firs on the hill.
Enough of the seasons,—I spare you the months of
the fever and chill.

IX

Ere opening your eyes in the city, the blessed church-
bells begin :
No sooner the bells leave off, than the diligence
rattles in :

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

You get the pick of the news, and it costs you never
a pin.

By and by there's the travelling doctor gives pills,
lets blood, draws teeth ;

Or the Pulcinello-trumpet breaks up the market
beneath.

At the post-office such a scene-picture—the new play,
piping hot !

And a notice how, only this morning, three liberal
thieves were shot.

Above it, behold the archbishop's most fatherly of
rebukes,

And beneath, with his crown and his lion, some little
new law of the Duke's !

Or a sonnet with flowery marge, to the Reverend
Don So-and-so

Who is Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Saint Jerome, and
Cicero,

“ And moreover,” (the sonnet goes rhyming,) “ the
skirts of St. Paul has reached,

Having preached us those six Lent-lectures more
unctuous than ever he preached.”

Noon strikes,—here sweeps the procession ! our Lady
borne smiling and smart

With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven
swords stuck in her heart !

Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle*
the fife ;

No keeping one's haunches still : it's the greatest
pleasure in life. .

X

But bless you, it's dear—it's dear ! fowls, wine, at
double the rate.

They have clapped a new tax upon salt, and what oil
pays passing the gate

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

It's a horror to think of. And so, the villa for me,
not the city !

Beggars can scarcely be choosers—but still—ah, the
pity, the pity !

Look, two and two go the priests, then the monks
with cowls and sandals,

And the penitents dressed in white shirts, a-holding
the yellow candles.

One, he carries a flag up straight, and another a cross
with handles,

And the Duke's guard brings up the rear, for the
better prevention of scandals.

Bang, whang, whang, goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle*
the fife.

Oh, a day in the city-square, there is no such pleasure
in life !

The faculty Browning had of what we may call painting a character, suggesting a look, an expression, a face, a mood, by tracing the effect on the narrator or the onlooker, is proved to our admiration by these creatures of his intimate world. In certain poems, and especially "Andrea del Sarto," where the painter's art is directly involved, the actual lineaments themselves are traced. Notice the portrait of King Francis at Fontainebleau, and the attendant group of courtiers :

ANDREA DEL SARTO

(CALLED "THE FAULTLESS PAINTER")

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia ; bear with me for once :
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

You turn your face, but does it bring your heart ?
I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it ? tenderly ?
Oh, I'll content him,—but to-morrow, Love !
I often am much wearier than you think,
This evening more than usual, and it seems
As if—forgive now—should you let me sit
Here by the window with your hand in mine
And look a half hour forth on Fiesole,
Both of one mind, as married people use,
Quietly, quietly, the evening through,
I might get up to-morrow to my work
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
To-morrow how you shall be glad for this !
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.
Don't count the time lost, either ; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require—
It saves a model. So ! keep looking so—
My serpentine beauty, rounds on rounds !
—How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there ! oh, so sweet—
My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
Which everybody looks on and calls his,
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks—no one's : very dear, no less !
You smile ? why, there's my picture ready made.
There's what we painters call our harmony !
A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike
—You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That's gone you know),—but I, at every point ;

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top ;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside ;
The last monk leaves the garden ; days decrease
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh ? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead !
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are :
I feel he laid the fetter : let it lie !
This chamber for example—turn your head—
All that's behind us ! you don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak ;
And that cartoon, the second from the door
—It is the thing, Love ! so such things should be—
Behold Madonna, I am bold to say.
I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—
Do easily, too—when I say perfectly
I do not boast, perhaps : yourself are judge
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,
And just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it,
No sketches first, no studies, that's long past—
I do what many dream of all their lives
—Dream ? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don't know how the others strive

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,
Yet do much less, so much less, some one says,
(I know his name, no matter) so much less !
Well, less is more, Lucrezia ! I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed, beating, stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
The sudden blood of these men ! at a word—
Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.
I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,
His hue mistaken—what of that ? or else,
Rightly traced and well ordered—what of that ?
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a Heaven for ? all is silver-grey
Placid and perfect with my art—the worse !
I know both what I want and what might gain—
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
“ Had I been two, another and myself,
Our head would have o'erlooked the world ! ” No
doubt.

Yonder's a work, now, of that famous youth
The Urbinate who died five years ago.
('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)
Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Reaching, that Heaven might so replenish him,
Above and through his art—for it gives way ;
That arm is wrongly put—and there again—
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
Its body, so to speak ! its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may understand.
Still, what an arm ! and I could alter it.
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
Out of me ! out of me ! And wherefore out ?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you.
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think—
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare—
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind !
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
“ God and the glory ! never care for gain.
The present by the future, what is that ?
Live for fame, side by side with Angelo—
Rafael is waiting. Up to God all three ! ”
I might have done it for you. So it seems—
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self ;
The rest avail not. Why do I need you ?
What wife had Rafael, or has Angelo ?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not—
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive :
Yet the will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,
God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.
'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
The best is when they pass and look aside ;
But they speak sometimes ; I must bear it all.
Well may they speak ! That Francis, that first time,
And that long festal year at Fontainebleau !
I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,
In that humane great monarch's golden look,—
One finger in his beard or twisted curl
Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
[I] painting proudly with his breath on me,
All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,—
And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
This in the back-ground, waiting on my work,
To crown the issue with a last reward !
A good time, was it not, my kingly days ?
And had you not grown restless—but I know—
'Tis done and past ; 'twas right, my instinct said ;
Too live the life grew, golden and not grey—
And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
How could it end in any other way ?
You called me, and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was to have ended there—then if
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost ?
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,
You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine !
“ Rafael did this, Andrea painted that—
The Roman's is the better when you pray,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

But still the other's Virgin was his wife—"'
Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge
Both pictures in your presence ; clearer grows
My better torture, I resolve to think.
For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,
Said one day Angelo, his very self,
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .
(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,
Too lifted up in heart because of it)
" Friend, there's a certain sorry little scrub
Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,
Who, were he set to plan and execute
As you are pricked on by your popes and kings,
Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours ! "
To Rafael's !—And indeed the arm is wrong.
I hardly dare—yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here—quick, thus the line should go !
Ay, but the soul ! he's Rafael ! rub it out !
Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,
(What he ? why, who but Michael Angelo ?
Do you forget already words like those ?)
If really there was such a chance, so lost,
Is, whether you're—not grateful—but more pleased.
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed !
This hour has been an hour ! Another smile ?
If you would sit thus by me every night
I should work better, do you comprehend ?
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
See, it is settled dusk now ; there's a star ;
Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
Come from the window, Love,—come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

King Francis may forgive me. Oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with !
Let us but love each other. Must you go ?
That Cousin here again ? he waits outside ?
Must see you—you, and not with me ? Those loans !
More gaming debts to pay ? you smiled for that ?
Well, let smiles buy me ! have you more to spend ?
While hand and eye and something of a heart
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth ?
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit
The grey remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more—the Virgin's face,
Not yours this time ! I want you at my side
To hear them—that is, Michael Angelo—
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.
Will you ? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.
I take the subjects for his corridor,
Finish the portrait out of hand—there, there,
And throw him in another thing or two
If he demurs ; the whole should prove enough
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,
What's better and what's all I care about,
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff.
Love, does that please you ? Ah, but what does he,
The Cousin ! what does he to please you more ?

I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it ?
The very wrong to Francis ! it is true

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.
Well, had I riches of my own ? you see
How one gets rich ! Let each one bear his lot.
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died :
And I have laboured somewhat in my time
And not been paid profusely. Some good son
Paint my two hundred pictures—let him try !
No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes,
You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have ?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance—
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Angelo and me
To cover—the three first without a wife,
While I have mine ! So—still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia,—as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle ! Go, my Love.

Again, in the grim ballad entitled simply
“Before,” observe the sketch, drawn in two
strokes and two epithets, of the evil genius of
the black offender :

What's the leopard-dog-thing, constant to his side,
A leer and lie in every eye in its obsequious hide ? . . .

Note also the companion-piece, “After,” with
its death-mask of the slain man :

Take the cloak from his face, and at first
Let the corpse do its worst.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

How he lies in his rights of a man !
Death has done all death can.
And absorbed in the new life he leads,
He recks not, he heeds
Nor his wrong nor my vengeance—both strike
On his senses alike,
And are lost in the solemn and strange
Surprise of the change. . . .

I would we were boys as of old
In the field, by the fold—
His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn
Were so easily borne.

Among other studies in the series which we might call Painters' Poems, "Fra Lippo Lippi" must be mentioned. This, too, was one of the dramatic monologues in which Browning drew upon the pages of Vasari. Like "Andrea del Sarto," the portrait is rendered with a certain mixture of literal facts and ideal humour. A comparison of Vasari's prose with the verse of the poem shows how faithfully Browning kept to his model. But when he came to the presentment of the figure and the indicating of his surroundings and the suggestion of the true functions of art, he knew how to transmute his material with as fine a touch as Shakespeare himself when he was making a transcript from Plutarch. The gaiety and the naturalness of the monologue are so contrived as to suggest without effort the merry vagabond spirit of the painter. Delightful use is made in it of bits of interspersed lyric to lighten the narrative colours, as in the passage

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

where Fra Lippo Lippi, tired of painting "saints and saints and saints again," says :

I could not paint all night—
Ouf ! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of song,—
Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb !
Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good's in life since ?
Flower o' the thyme—and so on. Round they went.
Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter,
Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,—three
slim shapes—
And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and
blood,
That's all I'm made of !

It is almost a pity not to give the poem entire, but we must be content here to give one more passage. It is where the painter has been speaking of the young art-student Guidi and then pauses to dilate on the real function of art :

However, you're my man, you've seen the world
—The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all !
—For what ? do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to ? What's it all about ?
To be passed o'er, despised ? or dwelt upon,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Wondered at ? oh, this last of course, you say.
But why not do as well as say,—paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it ?
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don't object, " His works
Are here already—nature is complete :
Suppose you reproduce her—(which you can't)
There's no advantage ! you must beat her, then."
For, don't you mark, we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see ;
And so they are better, painted—better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that—
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.

Browning's interest in music as a companion art to his own which signally helped to illustrate and enlarge the message he had to bring was, as we know, as keen as that he felt for the painter's calling. In his "Toccatà of Galuppi's" he has some verses by whose metrical cunning he succeeds in expressing something of the very cadence of the music they describe. We give the opening stanzas and then the seventh, in which he shows again how close his technical understanding of music was, and there we must leave Galuppi :

I

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find !
I can hardly misconceive you ; it would prove me
deaf and blind ;
But although I give you credit, 'tis with such a heavy
mind !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all
the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice, where the
merchants were the kings,
Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed
the sea with rings ?

III

Ay, because the sea's the street there ; and 'tis
arched by . . . what you call
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they
kept the carnival !
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all !

.

VII

What ? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths
diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something ? Those suspensions, those
solutions—" Must we die ? "
Those commiserating sevenths—" Life might last !
we can but try ! "

In the above poem Browning's imaginative phantasy enables him through the music—" the shadowy toccata "—to summon up an airy picture of the life of Venice, a city of pleasure existing by day and night only to enjoy its own sensations. Another musical study, " Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," seems to be an entirely fanciful portrait ; that is to say, the composer whom it describes is not to be found in any

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

musical cyclopædia. The monologue itself is that of an organist, another figure entirely of Browning's invention, who discusses a fugue in F minor. The verse fairly revels in double rhymes and grotesque idioms in trying to suggest the effect of the fugue and the singing of the five voices, in making them suggest the moral of life itself.

So your fugue broadens and thickens,
Greatens and deepens and lengthens,
Till one exclaims—"But where's music, the
dickens?
Blot ye the gold, while your spider-web
strengthens,
Blackened to the stoutest of tickens?"

I for man's effort am zealous.
Prove me such censure's unfounded!
Seems it surprising a lover grows jealous—
Hopes 'twas for something his organ-pipes
sounded,
Tiring three boys at the bellows?

Is it your moral of Life?
Such a web, simple and subtle,
Weave we on earth herein impotent strife,
Backward and forward each throwing his
shuttle,
Death ending all with a knife?

Music reappears in "Abt Vogler," and that poem we shall come to among the "Dramatis Personæ." But there is a set of verses in "Saul,"

88.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

telling of David singing to Saul in his agony, that show the sweetness Browning could give to his verse whenever he pleased. There is first this fine description of David's approach to Saul, who stood silent and grim within his tent :

At the first I saw nought but the blackness ; but
soon I descried
A something more black than the blackness—the
vast, the upright
Main prop which sustains the pavilion : and slow
into sight
Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest of
all ;—
Then a sunbeam, that burst thro' the tent-roof—
showed Saul.

Then David took the lilies off the harp-strings
and played :

Then I tuned my harp,—took off the lilies we twine
round its chords
Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noontide—
those sunbeams like swords !
And I first played the tune all our sheep know, as,
one after one,
So docile they come to the pen-door, till folding be
done.
They are white and untorn by the bushes, for lo, they
have fed
Where the long grasses stifle the water within the
stream's bed ;
And now one after one seeks its lodging, as star
follows s'ar

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Into eve and the blue far above us,—so blue and so far !

—Then the tune, for which quails on the cornland
will each leave his mate

To fly after the player ; then, what makes the crickets
elate,

Till for boldness they fight one another : and then,
what has weight

To set the quick jerboa a-musing outside his sand
house—

There are none such as he for a wonder, half bird
and half mouse !—

God made all the creatures and gave them our love
and our fear,

To give sign, we and they are his children, one family
here.

Then I played the help-tune of our reapers, their
wine-song, when hand

Grasps at hand, eye lights eye in good friendship, and
great hearts expand

And grow one in the sense of this world's life.—And
then, the last song

When the dead man is praised on his journey—
“ Bear, bear him along

With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets ! are
balm-seeds not here

To console us ? The land has none left, such as he
on the bier.

Oh, would we might keep thee, my brother ! ”—And
then, the glad chaunt

Of the marriage,—first go the young maidens, next,
she whom we vaunt

As the beauty, the pride of our dwelling.—And then,
the great march

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Wherein man runs to man to assist him and buttress
an arch

Nought can break ; who shall harm them, our friends ?

—Then, the chorus intoned

As the Levites go up to the altar in glory enthroned . . .

But I stopped here—for here in the darkness, Saul
groaned.

Of the other art-poems in “Men and Women,” “Old Pictures in Florence” and “The Guardian Angel” deserve a place in the Browning anthology. The first can hardly be judged by quotation, but we must find room for two stanzas in which Browning speaks of Nicolo and Cimabue and others :

But at any rate I have loved the season

Of Art's spring-birth so dim and dewy,

My sculptor is Nicolo the Pisan ;

My painter—who but Cimabue ?

Nor ever was man of them all indeed,

From these to Ghiberti and Ghirlandajo,

Could say that he missed my critic-meed.

So now to my special grievance—heigh ho !

Their ghosts now stand, as I said before,

Watching each fresco flaked and rasped,

Blocked up, knocked out, or whitewashed o'er

—No getting again what the church has grasped.

The works on the wall must take their chance,

“Works never conceded to England's thick
clime !”

(I hope they prefer their inheritance

Of a bucketful of Italian quick-lime.)

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

The second poem, "The Guardian Angel," must be given complete. Its sub-title is "A Picture at Fano," and you will observe as you read it how truly the poet felt for the painter, in translating his angelic art into song.

I

Dear and great Angel, wouldst thou only leave
That child, when thou hast done with him, for me !
Let me sit all the day here, that when eve
Shall find performed thy special ministry
And time come for departure, thou, suspending
Thy flight, mayst see another child for tending,
Another still, to quiet and retrieve.

II

Then I shall feel thee step one step, no more,
From where thou standest now, to where I gaze,
And suddenly my head be covered o'er
With those wings, white above the child who prays
Now on that tomb—and I shall feel thee guarding
Me, out of all the world ; for me, discarding
Yon heaven thy home, that waits and opes its door !

III

I would not look up thither past thy head
Because the door opes, like that child, I know,
For I should have thy gracious face instead,
Thou bird of God ! And wilt thou bend me low
Like him, and lay, like his, my hands together,
And lift them up to pray, and gently tether
Me, as thy lamb there, with thy garment's spread ?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

IV

If this was ever granted, I would rest
My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands
Close-covered both my eyes beside thy breast,
Pressing the brain, which too much thought expands,
Back to its proper size again, and smoothing
Distortion down till every nerve had soothing,
And all lay quiet, happy and supprest.

V

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired !
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.
O world, as God has made it ! all is beauty :
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared ?

VI

Guercino drew this angel I saw teach
(Alfred, dear friend)—that little child to pray,
Holding the little hands up, each to each
Pressed gently,—with his own head turned away
Over the earth where so much lay before him
Of work to do, though heaven was opening o'er him,
And he was left at Fano by the beach.

VII

We were at Fano, and three times we went
To sit and see him in his chapel there,
And drink his beauty to our soul's content
—My angel with me too : and since I care

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

For dear Guercino's fame, (to which in power
And glory comes this picture for a dower,
Fraught with a pathos so magnificent)

VIII

And since he did not work so earnestly
At all times, and has else endured some wrong,—
I took one thought his picture struck from me,
And spread it out, translating it to song.
My love is here. Where are you, dear old friend?
How rolls the Wairoa at your world's far end?
This is Ancona, yonder is the sea.

In "Men and Women" Browning perfected and finally justified his method. He peopled his region with a set of characters who live, indeed, by right, with a whole multitude of ideally created folk born at that time—including a new group of Dickens characters, Thackeray's Colonel Newcome, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, Charles Kingsley's Amyas Leigh, and George Meredith's Shagpat. It was, in fact, one of those times when the imaginary population of English literature had a signal enlargement, and Robert Browning was an active agent in the increase. Fra Lippo Lippi, Giotto, Galuppi, the Lady of the Firelight in "By the Fireside," Karshish the Arab, the serenader of the Villa, the Tyrant of "Instans Tyrannus," the mysterious Rider of "Childe Ronald to the Dark Tower came," the Valladolid poet, Master Hugues, Bishop Blougram, Constance and Norbert, Protus, Cleon, the Heretic of the "Heretic's Tragedy," and

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

the dead Grammarian of the "Funeral": what a populace, more lifelike, more interesting to us now than the lives of kings and queens, this one book of Browning's has added to the other Italy and the other England of the imagined world. The "Envoi" addressed to "E. B. B." as "One Word More" tells his own feeling at having achieved what was to prove his highest attainment in poetry:

There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished!
Take them, Love, the book and me together.
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

"Dramatis Personæ" came after "Men and Women"—twenty poems in all, continuing the same line of studies in the life and ruling passion of the characters sub-dramatized. They open with the sea-cycle of "James Lee's Wife," a love-story told in nine episodes, each attached to a change of mood: I, The Window; II, the Fireside; III, the Doorway; IV, the Beach; V, the Cliff; VI, the Book and the Wind; VII, the Rocks; VIII, the Drawing-board; and IX, the Ship's-deck. The wind in the sixth song becomes a symbol of the change, and the trouble in love, that have come over the story:

Still ailing, Wind? Wilt be appeased or no?
Which needs the other's office, thou or I?
Dost want to be disburthened of a woe,
And can, in truth, my voice untie
Its links, and let it go?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Small thing as this "James Lee" cycle may appear amid the mass of its author's work, it yet has had remarkable effect as seed sown in other people's minds. Many of its phrases and verses have become proverbial; one, "Love for a Key," has given the title to a romance. The opening stanza of No. III has in lyric colour hardly been excelled in the Victorian anthology :

The swallow has set her six young on the rail,
 And looks sea-ward :
The water's in stripes like a snake, olive pale
 To the leeward,—
On the weather-side, black, spotted white with the
 wind.
"Good fortune departs, and disaster's behind"—
Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail !

In "Dramatis Personæ," too, occur several other poems which added to the lyric dialect of their time; for instance, the pendant to "James Lee's Wife," which continues the same method, "Dīs Aliter Visum."

A few pages further and we come on yet another of the musical monologues in "Abt Vogler," who is heard confessing himself and his art "after he has been extemporizing upon the musical instrument of his invention." In his spirit we are led through the music of time to the eternal; through the creative musician to the Creator of all Music, the song culminates in the stanzas from which we quoted on our opening page :

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good
 shall exist ;
 Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good,
 nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for
 the melodist
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth
 too hard,
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the
 sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
 Enough that He heard it once ; we shall hear it by
 and by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
 For the fullness of the days ? Have we withered
 or agonized ?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing
 might issue thence ?
 Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should
 be prized ?
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
 Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal
 and woe :
But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the
 ear ;
 The rest may reason and welcome : 'tis we musicians
 know.

“ A Death in the Desert ” and “ Prospice ”
are different expressions of the approach to the
dread hour by two men who did not fear it.
The first is the supposed end of St. John, as
narrated in a parchment of Pamphylax ; and

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

it is made the vehicle of his faith in Christ's Blessed Mystery. The other is a wonderful song of heroic contempt for death :

PROSPICE

Fear death ?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe ;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go :
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last !
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

In several of the poems of this volume, written half-way in Browning's career, we have glimpses of his own life and history, disguised in the lives and aspects of other men. So it would certainly appear to be in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which is the poet's creed lyricized and never so lightly wrapped in a foreign roll. Read it in one mood and it seems little, and not sure of its effect ; read it in another, and it will impress you with its weighted lines, as it did afterwards a disciple like Swinburne, who converted some of them to his own use with a marvellous command of rhythm. Three stanzas will serve for its warranty in the critical anthology, which can only point out where the riches lie :

I

Grow old along with me !
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made :
Our times are in His hand
Who saith " A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half ; trust God : see all nor
be afraid ! "

II

Not that, amassing flowers,
Youth sighed " Which rose make ours,
Which lily leave and then as best recall ? "
Not that, admiring stars,
It yearned " Nor Jove, nor Mars ;
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends
them all ! "

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

III

Not for such hopes and fears
Annulling youth's brief years,
Do I remonstrate : folly wide the mark !
Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

We have to realize that in the term of years that passed between the books "Men and Women" and "Dramatis Personæ" the poet had lost his dear companion in life and art. Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in June 1861, and he left Italy for London in that year with half the motive for life and work seemingly gone. The burden of the thoughts the dire change brought to him may be gathered in many a page of the later book, such as we have cited. thoughts of love and death, and the courage in face of death. The real strength of his nature was to be seen in the writing of the next work.

VII

WITH the writing of "The Ring and the Book" Browning entered upon that later period which was marked by a critical change in his art of poetry. That is, conscious of an instrument whose use in rendering the spiritual predicament of men and women he had verified and justified, at point after point, he began to take a more intellectual interest in certain darker

100

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

phases of human nature, and the problems of life and mind they offered to him. No doubt his art as poetry suffered at times. For with the poet there is always a danger that as the ebullient lyrical temper in him grows less, with the advance of years he will replace the essentially poetical and imaginative by a more philosophical and excogitative treatment of the themes that occur to him.

We have had Browning as a tireless dealer in men and women; but now we have to watch how the method he had used in his preceding work was to be given yet larger dimensions. He had written dramatic lyrics before; now he turned to shape a dramatic epic on lines original and characteristically his own.

The title tells the source whence the story came—an old square yellow quarto, partly in type, partly written, which he bought for a lira (eightpence) on a second-hand bookstall in the Piazza at Florence. The book itself has now been translated into English and published for every man to read, and just as one takes up Holinshed to account for some of Shakespeare's history plays, so one turns the pages of this veritable document from the life to understand the process by which he converted it into a series of masterly monodramas. The treatment of the story as it takes shape in Browning's hands is of a kind that he alone, with his power of sustained imagination, could have safely ventured upon. He has divided it into twelve

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

cartoons, each one representing a different draft of the same theme, but so drawn as to be both a revelation of a single character and an illumination of the central tragedy. This, to put it crudely, as plainly as Browning put it himself, is nothing more or less than a Roman murder case. The murderer-in-chief is Guido Franceschini, who engaged four cut-throats to aid him in carrying out his revenge on a wife whom he took to be guilty. It is clear that in the hands of any ordinary artist the whole thing might have been turned into a lurid melodrama with no imaginative relief. But Browning, by his use of the witnesses and main actors in the drama, has contrived to give a spiritual cast to the most sordid elements of the theme. He has done it, too, without neglecting any detail, realistic, grotesque, or personal, which can call up the picture of Rome in the late seventeenth century.

In the first book he, as chorus to the tragedy, unfolds the whole story, opening with the Ring and suggesting its symbolic effect, and using no reserve as to any mystery to come :

Do you see this Ring ?

'Tis Rome-work, made to match

(By Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,

After a dropping April ; found alive

Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots

That roof old tombs at Chiusi : soft, you see,

Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick,

(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold
As this was,—such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear
At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow,—
To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap :
Since hammer needs must widen out the round,
And file emboss it fine with lily-flowers,
Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.
That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
With honey, so to speak ; he mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works.
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's repristination ! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume ;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the liliated loveliness,
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore :
Prime nature with an added artistry—
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.
What of it ? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say ;
A thing's sign : now for the thing signified.

Then he passes to the Old Yellow Book :

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
since ?

Examine it yourselves ! I found this book,
Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,
(Mark the predestination !) when a Hand,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
Across a square in Florence, crammed with booths,
Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time ;

Here it is, this I toss and take again ;
Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript :
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries
since.

Give it me back ! The thing's restorative
I' the touch and sight.

The succeeding pages give us the main events carried through to their catastrophe, and described in that verse, vividly colloquial yet at times concentrated to a degree, which was indeed the natural instrument of his fantasy. The passage in which he describes Count Guido and his wife Pompilia and the incidents of the murder in some twenty or thirty rapid, un-ornamented lines will serve to show how terse his writing in this kind had become :

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine,
Descended of an ancient house, though poor,
A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord,
Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust,
Fifty years old,—having four years ago
Married Pompilia Comparini, young,
Good, beautiful, at Rome, where she was born,
And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived
Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause,—
This husband, taking four accomplices,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Followed this wife to Rome, where she was fled
From their Arezzo to find peace again,
In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,
Aretine also, of still nobler birth,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi,—and caught her there
Quiet in a villa on a Christmas night,
With only Pietro and Violante by,
Both her putative parents ; killed the three,
Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen,
And, two weeks since, the mother of his babe
First-born and heir to what the style was worth
O' the Guido who determined, dared and did
This deed just as he purposed point by point.

But it was not enough in his estimate to tell a story of doom, figure the actors, paint the scene, and leave the reader to supply the rest ; for Browning the telling anew of this piece of history meant reincarnating each personage in himself and psychologizing the good and evil passions that had had a share in building it up.

Let this old woe step on the stage again, he says, not by mere sense and sight, but according to that intimate dramatic law which he had framed for the governing of his psychodrama. Lest we should lose sight of the poet himself in this strange pageant of his Roman characters, we are given for our relief at the end of the first book a delightful lyrical invocation, in which he calls up again the memory of his wife, and reminds us of the fact that this was the first grand task to which he had set himself after her death.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
When the first summons from the darkling earth
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
This is the same voice : can thy soul know change ?
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help !
Never may I commence my song, my due
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be ; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile :
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall !

The following books each in turn offer a new version of the story as realized from a different point of view and by a new speaker. The locutors take now one side, now another in judging the case on its merits. The first to appear personifies "Half-Rome," and we gather that the witness is himself a husband who has doubts of his own wife and of the other

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

sex at large. It is a wonderful motley vista of human nature and of Roman life upon which he opens the door, and he ends by suggesting that the murder and its legal consequences may be a very good thing for husbands and wives, especially in Rome.

What, you, Sir, come too ? (Just the man I'd meet.)
Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd :
This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze :
I'll tell you like a book and save your shins.
Fie, what a roaring day we've had ! Whose fault ?
Lorenzo in Lucina,—here's a church
To hold a crowd at need, accommodate
All comers from the Corso ! If this crush
Make not its priests ashamed of what they show
For temple-room, don't prick them to draw purse
And down with bricks and mortar, eke us out
The beggarly transept with its bit of apse
Into a decent space for Christian ease,
Why, to-day's lucky pearl is cast to swine.
Listen and estimate the luck they've had !

The next book, the third, conjures up "The Other Half-Rome" figured in the person of a rather romantically inclined young man, a bachelor without doubt, who speaks of the still lingering victim, Guido's wife, little Pompilia of the patient brow, a lamentable smile on her lips and a flower-like body in the hospital. The first speaker's character was seen in his Italian garrulity. The second was earnest and himself profoundly moved by what he had to tell.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

There she lies in the long white lazar-house.
Rome has besieged, these two days, never doubt,
Saint Anna's where she waits her death, to hear
Though but the chink o' the bell, turn o' the hinge
When the reluctant wicket opes at last,
Lets in, on now this and now that pretence,
Too many by half,—complain the men of art,—
For a patient in such plight. The lawyers first
Paid the due visit—justice must be done ;
They took her witness, why the murder was ;
Then the priests followed properly,—a soul
To shrive ; 'twas Brother Celestine's own right,
The same who noises thus her gifts abroad :
But many more, who found they were old friends,
Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
And go forth boasting of it and to boast.

The fourth book is entitled "Tertium Quid," and may be described as the Superior Person's view of the affair. He is too fine a gentleman to commit himself unwarrantably to any decisive judgment, and now by a touch of cynicism, and now by a note of indifference, he leaves people of his own standing and caste to form their own opinions of Guido and Pompilia and the other figures concerned. The fourth book left the pendulum oscillating, but with the fifth we are aware of a sudden and violent break in the rhythm. For now Count Guido Franceschini himself is brought upon the scene, chief actor in the play, and the scene itself shifts to the interior of the court-house. The man, the murderer, is revealed in the evidence he gives, and the mean, deceiving, and vainly disguising

108

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

words in which he endeavours to put a favourable complexion upon his part in the murder, which he cannot deny: the whole composes an autobiographic portrait of singular reality. Perhaps it is here and there a little too evident that the dramatist allowed himself the luxury of hating his villain, but undoubtedly he makes us feel as the Count betrays his nature out of his own mouth that here indeed was an evil thing, subtle and cruel in its evil doing.

I' the name of the indivisible Trinity !
Will my lords, in the plenitude of their light,
Weigh well that all this trouble has come on me
Through my persistent treading in the paths
Where I was trained to go,—wearing that yoke
My shoulder was predestined to receive,
Born to the hereditary stoop and crease ?
Noble, I recognised my nobler still,
The church, my suzerain ; no mock-mistress, she ;
The secular owned the spiritual : mates of mine
Have thrown their careless hoofs up at her call
“ Forsake the clover and come drag my wain ! ”
There they go cropping : I protruded nose
To halter, bent my back of docile beast,
And now am wheeled, one wide wound all of me,
For being found at the eleventh hour o' the day
Padding the mill-track, not neck-deep in grass :
—My one fault, I am stiffened by my work,
—My one reward, I help the Court to smile !

I am representative of a great line,
One of the first of the old families
In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

When my worst foe is fain to challenge this,
His worst exception runs—not first in rank
But second, noble in the next degree
Only ; not malice 'self maligns me more.

With the sixth book we pass to the evidence of Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the priest who helped Pompilia to fly from her husband to Rome. In the opening lines he is self-portrayed for us as by the suppressed or open emotion of his words and a characteristic gesture of his hand after a fashion to engage at once the onlookers' sympathies. There is a sincerity too in his speech that marks it off from the patent sophistry and the vicious rhetoric of the Count. Twelve lines from the close of his evidence show us the nature of the man and of the priest in the man shaken to the very roots of his being. If the blank verse rings very clear in the evidence of the priest, it takes on a note naive, and at times almost child-like, in the succeeding book, the seventh, which is the story of Pompilia told in her own words.

Listen what this is like !

When I was a mere child, my mother . . . that's
Violante, you must let me call her so
Nor waste time, trying to unlearn the word, . . .
She brought a neighbour's child of my own age
To play with me of rainy afternoons ;
And, since there hung a tapestry on the wall,
We two agreed to find each other out
Among the figures. " Tisbe, that is you,
With half-moon on your hair-knot, spear in hand,

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Flying, but no wings, only the great scarf
Blown to a bluish rainbow at your back :
Call off your hound and leave the stag alone ! ”
“ —And there are you, Pompilia, such green leaves
Flourishing out of your five finger-ends,
And all the rest of you so brown and rough :
Why is it you are turned a sort of tree ? ”
You know the figures never were ourselves
Though we nicknamed them so. Thus, all my life,—
As well what was, as what, like this, was not,—
Looks old, fantastic and impossible :
I touch a fairy thing that fades and fades.
—Even to my babe ! I thought, when he was born,
Something began for once that would not end,
Nor change into a laugh at me, but stay
For evermore, eternally quite mine.
Well, so he is,—but yet they bore him off,
The third day, lest my husband should lay traps
And catch him, and by means of him catch me.
Since they have saved him so, it was well done :
Yet thence comes such confusion of what was
With what will be,—that late seems long ago,
And, what years should bring round, already come,
Till even he withdraws into a dream
As the rest do : I fancy him grown great,
Strong, stern, a tal' young man who tutors me,
Frowns with the others “ Poor imprudent child ’
Why did you venture out of the safe street ?
Why go so far from help to that lone house ?
Why open at the whisper and the knock ? ”

With the eighth book we move from the chief actors in the tragedy to the lawyers who are assisting at the trial—Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, Pauperam Procurator. He is in

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

effect the official defender of criminals, just as the Fisc is the official prosecutor who appears in Book Nine, to wit—Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius, Fiesci et Rev. Cam. Apostol. Advocatus. It would have been easy to prove, on the lines adopted by some critics of Shakespeare, that Browning must have been an Italian lawyer at some period of his history in order to write the eighth and ninth books as he did, so crowded are they with legal terms and bits of Latin gag. Indeed, there are pages which make the effect of being more of a glossary than anything else, and are likely to try the patience of any ordinary reader. The complaisant comment of Dr. Johannes at the close of his long oration confesses the pleasant vanity of the man.

Then, with Book Ten, we come to the Pope himself, who sums up with the wisdom of justice and long and ripe human experience the true issues of the case. By this, indeed, the case, so far as the Court is concerned, is over, the murderer has been proved guilty, and it rests with the Pope as final arbiter to decide whether Count Guido shall suffer the extreme penalty or not. The one care he has at the last is for the possible spark of living spirit left in this vile nature, but there can be no mercy left for him on earth as there can be small chance of his final salvation, and so the Pope puts his hand to the death-warrant.

I will, Sirs : for a voice other than yours
Quickens my spirit. " Quis pro Domino ?

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

Who is upon the Lord's side ? ” asked the Count.
I, who write—

“ On receipt of this command,
Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
They die to-morrow : could it be to-night,
The better, but the work to do, takes time.
Set with all diligence a scaffold up,
Not in the customary place, by Bridge
Saint Angelo, where die the common sort ;
But since the man is noble, and his peers
By predilection haunt the People's Square,
There let him be beheaded in the midst,
And his companions hanged on either side :
So shall the quality see, fear, and learn.
All which work takes time : till to-morrow, then,
Let there be prayer incessant for the five ! ”

For the main criminal I have no hope
Except in such a suddenness of fate.
I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all :
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
Through her whole length of mountain visible :
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain ; which must not be.
Enough, for I may die this very night
And how should I dare die, this man let live ?
Carry this forthwith to the Governor !

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

To this succeeds the last utterance of the doomed man himself as he pours it into the ears of the Cardinal and the Abbot, two former friends of his, who come on the last night to hear his confession, and finally accompany him to the scaffold.

You are the Cardinal Acciaiuoli, and you
Abate Panciatichi—two good Tuscan names :
Acciaiuoli—ah, your ancestor it was,
Built the huge battlemented convent-block
Over the little forky flashing Greve
That takes the quick turn at the foot o' the hill
Just as one first sees Florence : oh those days !
'Tis Ema, though, the other rivulet,
The one-arched, brown brick bridge yawns over,—yes,
Gallop and go five minutes, and you gain
The Roman Gate from where the Ema's bridged :
Kingfishers fly there : how I see the bend
O'erturreted by Certosa which he built,
That Senescal (we styled him) of your House !
I do adjure you, help me, Sirs ! My blood
Comes from as far a source : ought it to end
This way, by leakage through their scaffold-planks
Into Rome's sink where her red refuse runs ?
Sirs, I beseech you by blood-sympathy,
If there be any vile experiment
In the air,—if this your visit simply prove,
When all's done, just a well-intentioned trick,
That tries for truth truer than truth itself,
By startling up a man, ere break of day,
To tell him he must die at sunset,—pshaw !
That man's a Franceschini ; feel his pulse,
Laugh at your folly, and let's all go sleep !
You have my last word,—innocent am I

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

As Innocent my Pope and murderer,
Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own,
As Mary's self,—I said, say, and repeat,—
And why, then, should I die twelve hours hence ? I—
Whom, not twelve hours ago, the gaoier bade
Turn to my straw-truss, settle and sleep sound
That I might wake the sooner, promptlier pay
His dues of meat-and-drink-indulgence, cross
His palm with fee of the good-hand, beside,
As gallants use who go at large again !
For why ? All honest Rome approved my part ;
Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,—nay,
Mistress,—had any shadow of any right
That looks like right, and, all the more resolved
Held it with tooth and nail,—these manly men
Approved ! I being for Rome, Rome was for me !

In the concluding pages, entitled "The Book and the Ring," we have the description of the execution narrated in the form of various letters actually written or supposed to be written at the time, with a passage of the sermon preached upon Pompilia. And then again, at the end of all, Browning himself clearly shows us his hand.

So did this old woe fade from memory,
Till after in the fullness of the days
My needs must find an ember yet unquenched
And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives
If precious be the soul of man to man.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

VIII

SPACE fails to treat at length all Browning's later poems; and they are not, unless we rate his intellectual individuality and its further revelation beyond his poetry, of equal importance with his earlier work. "Balaustion's Adventure" followed in August 1871—a "May-month amusement" he styled it in the dedication. It is a transcript from an episode in "Plutarch's Lives"—the life of Nicias, and very characteristically it presents her—

Balaustion! the lyric girl.

Browning's interest in the poetical diagnosis of mixed characters is shown again in his "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society," which is an imaginary portrait of Louis Napoleon, last Emperor of the French. The idea is to explain his character, not to gild his broken crown, or belittle his part in the human economy. As a character study it is remarkable; as a dramatic monologue it is colloquially, if not poetically, alive. The mannerism of the verse and the staccato of the rhythm destroy its real force; although it has lines and figures that take the reader's attention with the old power, as when it speaks of the "solitary great man" who is worth the world. We may call, if we will, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau the new Polonius;

116

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

certainly his morality is often expedient, and his reading of himself self-complacent.

"Fifine at the Fair" is a more engaging theme, and there is more music in the narrative mode. Browning had seen in Brittany the model, so to call her, for the character: a gypsy rope-dancer of flower-bright colours and bold charms to suit the sun and the autumn afternoon in the merry land of France. The agent of the poem is again a dramatized spokesman, in this case a "modified Don Juan," as Mrs. Sutherland Orr has happily described him. It is impossible to render its effect in piecemeal; but its attempt to find the equation between the sensual and the spiritual life is marked by Browning's robust play of humour and shrewd and subtle philosophy.

"Red-Cotton Night-cap Country, or Turf and Towers" suggests a fantasy in its title which hardly appears in its strange half-Balzacian, half-Carlylean narrative. Some of its descriptive passages have that subtle art of place in which Browning early attained a verse-painter's mastery. But the people are dreadful bourgeois creatures, "tame snakes," whose souls would seem to be less than those reptiles could embody, were it not that here they are winged, and lifted, barely lifted, into significance and made potential. Léonce Miranda is another study in the rotten morality of a virtual Crétin, and the sensation of his death is of a part with the whole cartoon. The book is more a novel in verse than a poem: Charles Reade would have used

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

the method of "Griffith Gaunt" and made it effective in prose. As in that story, the human atmosphere is overcharged, and the total effect is not quite satisfying.

Balaustion reappears in "Aristophanes' Apology," which forms the sequel to her "Adventure." In it she relates an episode that succeeded to her marriage, falling upon the day that brought the news of the death of Euripides to Athens. That evening she and her husband were at their own house when Aristophanes, returning home with a band of roysterers from the feast that followed what we should call the "successful production" of his play "The Thesmaphorians," suddenly appeared. Some instinct, mixed of satire and sympathy, has drawn him to the door of these people whom he knows as admirers of Euripides. In the apology that follows, expressed in very marked Aristophanic idiom, the old debate between the two rival playwrights comes to life again in congenial Browningsesque colours. The wealth of allusion, the extraordinary knowledge of the Greek drama, and the life that was behind it exhibited in the poem individualize it at every point; but the texture is nevertheless not quite Greek. Browning himself may be described, so far as the warfare between the two poets attaches him rather to one camp than to the other, as a Euripidean. He sees in that poet a truer interpreter of the grand problems of human nature than the ironical master of comedy who made him the victim of his wit.

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

The poem has been described as the finest contribution to the criticism of Greek drama written in our time. This is perhaps to say too much, but it is undoubtedly a dramatic study in the natures and characters of two great dramatists which gives one "curiously to think." It almost appears as if Browning out of his feeling for these two Greek poets had arrived at a stage now, in his own expression, of the tragic and comic elements of life, which was to threaten at points the adjustment of his poetic instrument to his material.

In his next poem, "The Inn Album," which appeared in November 1875, he takes four people, not in themselves very interesting and not redeemed by anything in their circumstance, and works out in their story a somewhat dreary spiritual tragedy. The elements do not quite combine poetically, and we leave the pages with a sense of disappointment, although it has noble passages like that describing the "burst of landscape" through the window which shows you "England's best,"—and the floating air and light in a May morning above the well-wooded and watered country, where a "steel-bright" stream threads the mist.

"Pacchiarotto, and How he Worked in Dis-temper," published with other poems in 1876, is, in effect, an apology for Browning's own art, and suggests that some of the criticisms, fair and unfair, levelled at his art had rankled not a little in his mind. He turns his critics into chimney-sweepers,—“ We critics as sweeps out

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

your chimbley!"—and he accuses them of bringing more dirt into the house than they carry out. Some of Browning's "all's well with the world" philosophy is found in this poem. There is a grand cosmic drama going on, and the earth is but the practice place, and we must wait patiently for the great change.

"At the 'Mermaid'" carries us back to his old discrimination of the two kinds of poets in his essay on Shelley; but we do not feel sure as we read it that Browning himself would always, in the case of other poets, rigidly divide their works from their lives. He protests that people seek out the facts of his private life in order to explain the dark things in his poems; yet it is in this very poem that Browning does lay open his heart for us:

Have you found your life distasteful?
My life did, and does, smack sweet. . . .

The two next poems, "House" and "Shop," continue the same line of vigorous expostulation and leave us with a grotesque idea of the possible cause for his feeling. It is as if the Browning Society had collected at his door one summer's morning to ask what he had for breakfast, and if bacon and dry toast were a good preparation for dramatic psychology? The tenth stanza of "House" contains the famous allusion to Shakespeare and his sonnets. "With this same key," he asks, "did Shakespeare unlock his heart? If so, the less Shakespeare he!"

The couple of poems called "Pisgah Sights"

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

in the same volume give us another view of Browning's method of understanding life. He says that the world must of necessity appear out of proportion to us because we are too close to things, but if we can only move ourselves away from the matters that concern us and look on them even a handbreadth off, then the symmetry appears, and there is light. But it takes all Browning's art of verse to reconcile us to the use of metre which falls to a tripping step, and to the over-indulgence of double and triple rhymes.

The same superabundance of rhyming rather spoils one's pleasure in the otherwise delightful poem "St. Martin's Summer." In the succeeding ballad, "Hervé Riel," Browning is once again complete master of his instrument. Idiom, metre, and rhyme all march with one accord to the given tune.

IX

THE "Agamemnon" of Æschylus was the piece of work that Browning set himself after "Pacchiarotto." In it he tried to be faithfully literal and accurately interpretative; but he did not attempt the impossible. "I have done," he said, "as I would be done by." For the rest, was not the task commanded of him by his "venerated friend, Thomas Carlyle," and made worthy in his eyes by the insertion of that "dear and noble name," and did not the standard of translation the poet adopted require almost an

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

audience of Carlyles and Brownings, interested in the extreme art of verbal gymnastic and rhetoric, to understand the text in detail?

In the following May he added "La Saisiaz" and "The Two Poets of Croisic" to his works. The first, which means "The Sun," commemorates A. E. S.—that is, Ann Egerton-Smith, who died while on a visit to Browning and his sister at the villa so called, near Geneva. It is one of the most personal of his writings, and the description of the morning, returned from an early plunge in a pool to find no sign of the waiting tall white figure who usually stood on a mound to greet him, is wrought in bright, sad colours. Finally the poem becomes an argument for the divine destiny of the soul, urged over the soul of Rousseau. "The Two Poets of Croisic" is in another vein altogether. The first poet is René Gentilhomme, who served the Prince of Condé and became Muses' lackey to Louis XIII. the second, Paul Desfarges Briand (or Maillard), born at Croisic in 1699, who played off a hoax on Paris and Voltaire by using the literary disguise of a supposed Mlle. Malcrais de la Vigne—"a nice Breton name." The story gains fantasy by Browning's telling; but it was one that could have been told in brief, say in Pope's couplets, with more verisimilitude.

In 1879 a first series of "Dramatic Idylls" appeared to be a return to his earlier manner; but if so, it was resumed with a signal difference. He still sought to project the individual soul or temperament by a forcing of some dramatic

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

idea, but his mind had become so fully stored with allusion, and his verse so easily grew dilated, that he often rather misses the ballad-like dispatch in his descriptive exuberance. Here he turns to the common folk for his themes. One of his characters is Martin Relph, who might have been a hero and who lives on a coward; terribly, remorsefully conscious of the fact. Halbert and Hob—the two wild men, father and son, who lived in a wild part of the North Country—are two genre portraits, still more grimly veracious, with a Christmas motive to enhance the father's tragedy. "Ivan Ivanovitch" is a tragic idyll—a Russian wolf-tale, where a mother's love fails in face of death—"Humanity's new wrong, motherhood's first disgrace." The ballad movement of the narrative is superb. "Ned Bratts" is a new reading of the tale of "Old Tod" in Bunyan's "Life and Death of Mr. Badman." The poem is bold and vivid to a degree; but Browning is simply not in it as a trenchant narrator by the side of Bunyan. Witness the ushering in of Old Tod in the latter's page, where the prose rhythm works like a charm under Bunyan's spell.

A second series of "Dramatic Idylls," issued in 1880, has more studies in the grotesque, dramatic portraits of men in action and passion. "Clive" is the most attractive, because one is already curious about his character. But the one piece of real ballad that stands forth in the book is in the Arab story of "Muléykeh," the

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

mare, and of Hoseyn's "ride" in pursuit of Duhl, the horse-stealer, who has gone off with her. The most memorable thing in the book that goes to make up what we may call the Browning testament, is to be found in the lyric postscript; and the fourteen-line prelude to "Jocoseria," the book of 1883, takes up the same personal cue. The ballad of "Donald" in this book tells vividly the mean tale of what amounts to the cruel murder of a stag by a deer-stalker on a mountain ridge. The distinctive note of the book is implied in the title, and it is perhaps not unfair to say that in poetry it is very easy to overwork the vein. There is a mixed element of serious and semi-grotesque in the long story of Jochanan Hakkadosh that makes it become rather tiresome before the whole of its seven hundred lines odd in terza-rima have run their course. The story, which treats of a supposed Rabbinic legend, has some fine passages; but it must be read as a whole, or it will not be understood. In another poem of the series, "Ixion," we have the old myth in a new form, and so wrought as to convey, and in this case with absolute conviction, the poet's sense of the Promethean revolt against divine tyranny.

November of the next year, 1884, brought a volume in Persian disguise, "Ferishtah's Fancies." Ferishtah is a supposed Dervish historian of the seventeenth century, and it seems to have been one of Pilpay's fables that Browning had read as a boy that indirectly

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

suggested the cycle of poems. The "Fancies" deal in "The Eagle" and "The Melon-Seller" with the Dervish's own life. The remaining poems form a series of his moral homilies directed to others. "Shah Abbas" deals with faith, "The Family" with prayer, "The Sun" with the Incarnation, "A Camel-Driver" with punishment, "Mihrab Shah" with the problem of pain, "A Pillar at Sebzevah" contrasts knowledge and love, and "Apple-Eating" asks of life its riddle. The poems are not really Persian, and it has been well said that the Eastern garments are used for a disguise and not a habit. The philosophy of these "Fancies" is characteristically Browning's, full of hope and unconquerable optimism. We discover again that it is in moments of lyric exuberance and not in his narrative or homiletic moods that Browning seems to find his most expressive note.

The rest of the chronicle may soon be run through. Browning had been living for some time in Warwick Crescent, Paddington. In 1887, when he was seventy-five years old, his son was married and he changed his London abode, moving to South Kensington. One of his letters written from the former address and dated July 16, 1886, which refers to Landor and to a suggested republication of his essay on Shelley, testifies, so far as handwriting can, how well under control were his faculties of brain, eye, and hand.

In "Parleyings with certain People," which appeared in 1887, Browning fell back upon his

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

old method of metempsychosis, putting himself into the states of life and thought of other persons, who could act as conductors to his own view of life. The full title of the book, as he designed it, is so characteristic that it deserves to be quoted at length: "Parleyings with certain People of Importance in their Day." The "people" include Bernard de Mandeville, Daniel Bartoli, Christopher Smart, George Bubb Dodington, Francis Furini, Gerard de Laresse, and Charles Avison. A dialogue between Apollo and the Fates opens the list, and another between John Fust and his friends ends it. The name of M. Milsand, in whose memory it is inscribed, recalls a friend by whose criticism he had profited in his later years. Of the actual interlocutors, Bernard de Mandeville was the author of "The Fable of the Bees," a book which was ordered to be burnt by the common hangman. Browning had great respect for this book and calls its writer Sage Mandeville; Bartoli was a Roman Jesuit; Christopher Smart was the unfortunate poet whom even Browning misjudges by saying that "until he lost his reason he was a very indifferent versifier." Perhaps Browning, like many another, had read only Smart's "Song of David," which was, according to the legend, written in a madhouse. For there are undoubtedly flashes of imagination in his earlier work, although they are intermitted with Cambridge fumes. Bubb Dodington was a beau, and follower of Walpole, and is generally considered the type of an immoral age of English public life.

126

BROWNING & HIS POETRY

X

BROWNING'S last book, "Asolando," appeared on the day of his death, December 12, 1889. It contained some remarkable personalia, "Fancies and Facts," and lyric memoranda, including a quartet of Bad Dreams. But perhaps "Flute Music" (with an accompaniment) and the "Prologue" and last two poems, one of which is the "Epilogue" not only to a book but a life of poetry, are the pages one remembers best. From the "Epilogue" comes indeed a strain of night and day, and fear giving way to courage, which is like a *réveillé* heard by a soldier's grave—the grave of

One who never turned his back but marched
breast forward—
Never doubted clouds would break.

There is the note of an old poet who remained young in heart and gave his last music a crescent strain. We who look back over his whole work see that he wrote at the end as at the beginning by the light of his imagination. He has left us in his poetry indeed an expression of human nature rich, subtle, and various to a degree, which even "in the bustle of man's work-time" may be recalled for its sense of a larger life and an immortal destiny.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following books are recommended for the further study of Browning and his work :

- “ The Works of Robert Browning, with Introductions by Sir F. G. Kenyon ” (Smith, Elder and Co., 1912-13).
- “ Poems and Plays ” (1844-69) (“ Everyman’s Library ”).
- “ The Ring and the Book ” (“ Everyman’s Library ”).
- “ The Old Yellow Book ” (“ Everyman’s Library ”).
- Mrs. Orr : “ Life and Letters of Browning ” (1891 and 1908).
- Mrs. Orr : “ Handbook to Browning’s Works ” (1902).
- Symons, Arthur : “ Introduction to the Study of Browning ” (1886).
- Sharp, Wm. : “ Life of Browning ” (“ Great Writers ” Series) (1890).
- Waugh, A. : “ Browning ” (“ Westminster Biographies ”) (1900).
- Gosse, E. W. : “ Personalialia ” : Robert Browning (1890).
- Jones, Sir Henry : “ Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher ” (Nelson’s Shilling Library) (1912).
- Griffin, W. H. : “ Life of Browning ” (1910).
- Berdoe, E. : “ The Browning Cyclopædia ” (1892).
- Berdoe, E. : “ Browning Studies ” (1895).
- Chesterton, G. K. : “ Robert Browning ” (“ English Men of Letters ”) (1903).

Problems
with the design
of the
data structure
of the
system

Problems with
the design of
the data structure
of the system

PK
1001
M

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Santa Barbara

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW.

APR 2 1970

H

WI # 734 29

R



3 1205 02041 8487

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A A

001 425 788

5

